

Entanglements of the retro-garde.

A Nest of Ninnies by Ashbery and Schuyler in the Polish translation

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Vladimir Kirrilov, a proletarian poet, wrote: “in the name of our Tomorrow, we will burn Raphael / destroy the museums and trample the flowers of art” – which later became the motto of the Proletkult publishing house¹. He was not original in his call for destroying tradition in 1919. The most famous document of the avant-garde, *The Futurist Manifesto*, published in 1909 in “Le Figaro”, reads in point ten: “We wish to destroy museums, libraries, academies of any sort”²; in a way, all subsequent calls of this sort are a translation of Marinetti’s manifesto. In *The Total Art of Stalinism* Boris Groys not only combines promises to start recreating a just world and completely new art from scratch, which happened under the auspices of the Bolshevik party as a matter of utmost importance throughout the 1920s up until the Stalinist purges, but he also unambiguously points to the fire of Lenin’s revolution as the common ground for the originality of different varieties of the Soviet avant-garde³. The notion of the avant-garde is connected with destructive energy – burning the old culture – twin to war, and social revolution, but it is also present in the refusal to work, which can be understood as the refusal to create following hitherto rules. Soon it was revealed how paradoxically unoriginal

¹ Zbigniew Jarosiński, *Literatura i nowe społeczeństwo. Idee lewicy literackiej dwudziestolecia międzywojennego* [Literature and a new society. Ideas of the literary left of the interwar period] (Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1983), 129. Kirillov’s poem *We* is often referred to as emblematic of the early works published in the Proletkult (1917–1922). Teresa Zobek, “Żelazny Mesjasz” [The Iron Messiah], *Rusycystyczne Studia Literaturoznawcze* 11 (1988): 42.

² Christa Baumgarth, *Futuryzm*, translated into Polish by Jerzy Tasarski (Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, 1978), 35. Source of the English translation: <https://www.booksontrial.com/the-full-text-of-the-futurist-manifesto>.

³ Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism. Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship and Beyond*, translated into English by Charles Rougle (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992).

the fate of radically avant-garde programs can be; in 1933 the Nazis publicly burnt books in the streets of Berlin, thus implementing the rules of healthy, National Socialist art, in accordance with futurist models. Significantly, *In Search of Lost Time*, a novel by a Jewish homosexual man written in French, and translated into German by Walter Benjamin, was among the burnt books. Such cases of repetitions of destruction demonstrate that “originality”, understood as a complete novelty, whose price is paid with ruins as the place of the new world’s epiphany, is not necessarily the best-understood stakes of the avant-garde artistic practice.

In her 2010 book *Unoriginal Genius*, Marjorie Perloff continues the already advanced history of the avant-garde’s refusal to create according to old rules, which – paradoxically – had become its own tradition at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries. At the same time, Perloff observes that negative categories – which strive towards transcreation⁴ rather than destruction – remain relevant (in an avant-garde way) considering the art of copying or citing in the age of digital communication. The “poetics of translation” is a significant theme which appears at the beginning of that book in reference to Eliot’s and Pound’s transcreational strategies, as well as to Benjamin’s decomposition, whom Perloff presents as an author of passages consisting mostly of quotes. From my perspective, the critical potential of transcreation is to not only transform the past, but to also allow a change in the way it is understood, at odds with the canon. In his “decompositions” of the cultural urban space for new meanings manifesting themselves in repetition, Benjamin created a whole ideological repository in a number of figures molded as if they were written for Brecht’s opera: a conspirator, bohemian artist, ragman, and whore – who share the same rule of negative-dialectic outskirts of the bourgeois order, realized in specific cases of a parody of work⁵. Referring to Benjamin’s *Passages*, Perloff defines her concept of the avant-garde’s lack of originality as *réécriture*:

In the beginning was translation: the layering of languages is one variant of the citational or intertextual poetics I spoke of earlier. From the Eliot of *The Waste Land*, the Pound of *The Cantos* or the Marcel Duchamp who reproduced his early ready-mades and notecards in *The Green Box*, to Charles Bernstein “writing through” Walter Benjamin in the opera-libretto *Shadow-time*, and the use of appropriated text, including archival material, documentary, informational manual, and, most recently, the discourse of the Internet from hypertext to blog to database, *citationality*, with its dialectic of removal and graft, disjunction and conjunction, its interpretation of origin and destruction, is central to twenty-first-century poetics. Indeed, *réécriture*, as Antoine Compagnon calls it, is the logical form of “writing” in an age of literally mobile or transferable text – text that can be readily moved from one digital site to another or from print to screen, that can be appropriated, transformed, or hidden by all sorts of means and for all sorts of purposes⁶.

⁴ Perloff references August and Haroldo de Campos, representatives of Brazilian concrete poetry; the latter was a translator and the author of the concept of translation as transcreation: the idea of recreating a text, which is at odds with servile subjugation of translation to the alleged “transcendental meaning” of the original. In his 1962 lecture, he referred to Pound’s maxim make it new in a way surprising to us – for referring to translation as transcreating a text, and thus bringing literary past back to life. Haroldo de Campos, *Transcrição* (São Paulo: Perspectiva, 2013). Cited after Gabriel Borowski, “Transkrecja w Indiach i Brazylii. Wokół koncepcji Purushottamy Lala i Haroldo de Camposa” [Transcreation in India and Brazil. On concepts by Purushottama, Lalo, and Haroldo de Campos], *Między Oryginałem a Przekładem* 1 (2023): 155–156.

⁵ Walter Benjamin, “The Paris of the Second Empire”, translated into Polish by Hubert Orłowski, in Orłowski: *Anioł historii. Eseje, szkice, fragmenty* [Angel of history. Essays, sketches, fragments], edited by Hubert Orłowski (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 1996), 335–378.

⁶ Marjorie Perloff, *Unoriginal Genius. Poetry by Other Means in the New Century* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 17.

In experimental poetry of the 20th and 21st centuries – Perloff’s starting point in polemics with the famous, anti-avant-garde *Postmodernism...* by Fredric Jameson – ostentatious yet creative repetition proves to fuel creation⁷. According to Perloff, consciously transposing the past is the best behaviour model of the late avant-garde, for which the imperative of original expression eventually turned out to be a limitation: both in terms of artistic freedom and possibilities of criticism⁸. This perspective also incorporates the already institutionalized form of artistic individualism, i.e., the figure of an original poet – as a tradition of high modernism which requires reworking.

Perloff identifies the post-war, avant-garde practice of concrete poetry as the supply base for the activities of the “unoriginal genius”. However, she could also incorporate the utopian, counter-cultural postulate of supranational art, which gained its transnational character in conceptualism. In both cases, the artistic practice operated with the notion of autotelicity (understood differently than in terms of the aesthetics of high modernity) – attributed with signs, resulting from a sense of obscurity of the artistic matter, treated as a fusion of means of expression and meaning. In the case of conceptualism, autotelicity – without the notion of originality⁹ – became a tool of resistance against the artistic norms of the nationalized Cold-War culture which – from the side of the USA – already operated with the notion of artistic freedom and independence in reference to aesthetic autonomy¹⁰. In concrete poetry, just as in conceptual practices, works

⁷ Jameson conceptualized late modernity as a gigantic rewriting operation of the old system (Fredrick Jameson, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, translated into Polish by Maciej Płaza [Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2011], XIV–XV), at the same time noticing its potential for redirecting public attention from economy to the tools for expressing cultural awareness. However, the agency of agential individuals plays a paradoxical role in *Postmodernism...*: on the one hand, it is an element of the bourgeois culture, which produced the late, alienating version of modernism, but on the other – the possibility of empowering an artistic experience also proves to be a premise for emancipatory messages. Following the “death of an author”, modernism without an agential subject (understood by Jameson in Marxist terms as a group of individuals) does not bring the possibility of criticism, and consequently, a change of the social reality, which Jameson considers the ultimate test of effectiveness of various types of new discourses. See Jameson, *Postmodernizm...*, Chapter 1, especially 53–54. See also Fredric Jameson, “Marxism and Postmodernism”, in *Jameson: Cultural Turn. Selected Writings on the Postmodern (1983–1998)* (London, New York: Verso, 1998), 36–37.

⁸ Similarly, Hal Foster argued for the avant-garde character of the neo-avant-garde as a creative extension of the emancipatory tradition of the historical avant-garde; he even claimed that only the second wave of the avant-gardes can properly thematize e.g. social institutionalization of art. Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real. The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*, translated into Polish by Mateusz Borowski, Małgorzata Sugiera (Kraków: Universitas, 2010), 46.

⁹ When it comes to works of art using language or letters, on the one hand, they subordinated the necessity of translating their meaning in terms of the materiality of the message, and on the other, it required a theoretical comment, repetitive in relation to the viewed phenomenon. Such a comment could be a part of the message of e.g. an exhibition, however, it was not always treated by artists as an element of the work of art itself. Robert Bailey, *Art & Language International. Conceptual Art. Between the Art Worlds* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 16–17.

¹⁰ Serge Guilbaut writes about politicizing the notion of aesthetic autonomy, which has become an element of the Cold-War propaganda in the cultural dispute between the USA and the USSR (Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art* [Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1983]; see also Gabriel Rockhill, “The Politycity of ‘Apolitical’ Art”, in Guilbaut: *Radical History and the Politics of Art* [New York: Columbia University Press, 2014]). One could argue that there was a subtle, intergenerational, political polemics between post-war designers of the American art of abstract expressionism, and the younger generation of artists representing the neo-avant-garde. The cosmopolitan character of neo-avant-garde formations, fuelled by the counterculture, was based on (among other things) the aversion to using artistic activities as an element of the Cold War propaganda. Hence conceptual movements all around the world favored such meanings of art which would neutralize references to national canons, rooted in modernist premises on both sides of the Iron Curtain (see e.g. Miško Šuvaković, *Neo-Aesthetic Theory. Complexity and Complicity Must Be Defended*, translated into English by Žarko Cvejić et al. [Vienna: Hollitzer Verlag 2017], 81–82). *Art & Language*, forming internationally, but mostly in the UK and the USA, with contributions from Australian artists, is a good example of such an action. The authors of the movement’s program (e.g. Ian Burn and Terry Smith) reflected upon the domination of American conceptualists (“all artists play according to American rules, even though only America can win”), caused by the political and cultural hegemony of the USA, through a detailed analysis of the notion of “provincialism” in terms of postcolonial criticism. Bailey, 77–108.

of a supranational character were at stake, which constituted an extension of the cosmopolitan utopia of art “being itself” (with the avant-garde at its basis), i.e. not requiring institutionalized mediation or valuating. Those works of art were not marked by originality – be it belonging to the notion of individual genius, or nationally distinguishing a given culture.

The referent as a socially settled signified is provocatively destroyed in the neo-avant-garde experiments, and artistic practices (also in the form of appropriation and repetition) are supposed to refer to the artistic matters understood autotelically. However, this does not mean that they are deprived of critical or political meanings¹¹. Perloff admits that the neo-avant-garde autotelicity exposes art to criticism in Jameson’s style – who accuses experimental impulses not of the inability to innovate, but of the disappearance of emancipatory energy¹².

It could be said that the drama of “the avant-garde’s burnout” plays out between criticism of culture founded on the Marxist utopia of creating a new world, and Perloff’s book presenting the late modern possibilities of the unoriginal genius. In this brief, cursory outline of the American debate about late modern art, significant for the late 20th century, we can see the consequences of abandoning the tradition of creative individualism and originality, which end in (at least according to some) the disappearance of the ability to resist institutions. Perloff abstracts the political moment in art, only pointing out to the potential of the neo-avant-garde, paradoxical innovation, which – despite the dominant artistic repetition – remains creative. However, I believe that the late avant-garde can also be described differently, not necessarily striving towards confirming some sort of negated yet still individualized genius. Can negated innovativeness still carry the energy of critical subversion – despite accusations from representatives of Marxist criticism at the end of the 20th century? This question may prove significant from the perspective of Eastern Europe (up until recently – the Eastern Bloc), where the majority of the post-avant-garde gestures (of extraction and transplantation, literally understood movability and metaphorical character of texts) facilitated on the art market (internationalized after 1989), resulting in a wave of translations of experimental American poetry from the early 1990s, can appear in an even more decadent light, giving them a wistful luster of products which are not only unoriginal, but also imported.

From Perloff’s perspective as a theoretician and interpreter of avant-garde poetry, congenial translation, i.e. reworking the matter of outstanding poetry in order for it to gain expression in a different language, and in reference to a different culture, characterized by a different identity, is insignificant for the avant-garde. In reference to translation as “rewriting” – i.e., copying, intercepting, but also writing through the original – I will try to consider whether the retro avant-garde is indeed deprived of critical energy. From this perspective, the present paper will focus on the possibilities of the late, Eastern-European avant-garde as an artistic project suspended between burnout and subversion, rather than on *A Nest of Ninnies* by John Ashbery and James Schuyler, translated into Polish by Andrzej Sosnowski and Tadeusz Pióro in 2022. Additionally, Polish liter-

¹¹According to Perloff, the awareness of relationships with the avant-garde traditions remained significant for concreteists, pop-artists, conceptualists, or representatives of the Language group, and it brought the gesture of copying, connected with a tributary, although often parodistic address (Perloff, 55–58). Defining a work of art in terms of autotelicity peculiar to them, i.e. focusing mostly on the matter of art, was typically connected to the countercultural attitude of political apoliticality.

¹²According to Perloff, Eugene Gomringer’s career, who became Rosenthal’s head designer in 1967, is a negative example of this.

ary scholars frequently criticize late avant-garde emancipatory potential, seeing in it a doubtless notion already at the starting point, elitist or of secondary character, and as such – connected with postmodernism (as understood by Jameson)¹³. The question is whether objects – such as the Polish translation of *A Nest of Ninnies*, in which I would like to see a phenomenon which would be material in the avant-garde sense – subject themselves to such a criterion of valuating.

Sosnowski and Pióro's translation has not inspired hot debates among Polish literary circles. In fact, having read the few available critical reviews of this book, one could say that this representative of the New York school – to which Sosnowski refers to as “perfect trash” – is in no way provocative, and its publication in Poland came by no surprise for the critics. However, if we were to ask the question, i.e. why *A Nest of Ninnies* – in its lofty redundancy – has been translated into Polish, we would also have to repeat the question which appeared in American discussions: why was it written in the first place? The whole discourse surrounding this book opens with a reference to the model of reception representing the poetics of a “light” novel about the American *petites bourgeoises*. We encounter such a suggestion in literary operating manuals for *A Nest...* by Mikołaj Wiśniewski or Tadeusz Pióro, as well as in the few critical-literary reviews: by Antoni Zajac in “Literatura na Świecie” or Agnieszka Wolny-Hamkało in “Dwutygodnik”¹⁴. As we learn from the preface to *A Nest...*, the book's existence is a result of a coincidence and a friendly game¹⁵. Although its conception remains a distant reflection of the surrealist method of *le cadaver exquis*, the goal was not to reach the depths of absurdity – or at least not to the extent it would be understood as something unique, inexpressible, or inexhaustible. In his monograph on Schuyler, Wiśniewski writes that *A Nest...* consists of loosely connected scenes, the narrative does not go in any particular direction, and it is led exclusively through dialogues. Neither do the protagonists' conversations go anywhere, and in many cases they result from a play of consonance or word associations known from Raymond Roussel's literary practice: “The reader may have an impression that they are listening to an incoherent, at times even absurd chat at a party”¹⁶. The “ninnies” are mostly occupied with parties, cocktails, and meetings with friends. Other kinds of absurdity (sophisticated dishes, absurd decisions, bizarre occurrences) are skillfully dosed, in order to make us treat this reality as familiar, close, and credible for (almost) all the time. And although the protagonists – the Bushes, Bridgewaters, and Kelsos (according to Sosnowski, they are all rich and influential American families) who merge with one another like in a Shakespearean comedy – travel a lot, taking readers to Florida, Paris, and Italy, those

¹³On the notion of the avant-garde as something largely different from the counterculture, and simultaneously less significant for its character than it is commonly believed, see Jerzy Jarniewicz's paper, “Awangarda i kontrkultura: punkty styyczne” [The avant-garde and counterculture: points of contact], *Czas Kultury* 2 (2018). For a similar discussion on late-avant-garde phenomena as impossible due to the absence of the idea of innovativeness, see Alina Świeściak (“Fikcja awangardy?” [The fiction of the avant-garde?]) in Świeściak: *Współczynnik sztuki. Polska poezja awangardowa i postawangardowa między autonomią a zaangażowaniem* [The art factor. Polish avant-garde and post-avant-garde poetry between autonomy and engagement] [Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2019], 153 i n.).

¹⁴Mikołaj Wiśniewski, “Kampowanie. Gniazdko dudków” [Camping. A Nest of Ninnies], in Wiśniewski: *Nowy Jork i okolice. O twórczości Jamesa Schuylera* [New York and its surroundings. On works by James Schuyler] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo IBL PAN, 2018), 245–302; Tadeusz Pióro, “«Where the Children Play Among Ruins»: A Nest of Ninnies and the Literary Legacies of New York Dada”, *Polish Journal of American Studies* 15 (2021): 57–67; Agnieszka Wolny-Hamkało, “Umieć w camp” [Being able to camp], *Dwutygodnik* 331 (2022), <https://www.dwutygodnik.com/artykul/10023-umiec-w-kamp.html>, date of access 3.11.2023; Antoni Zajac, “Podmiejska sielanka” [Suburban pastoral], *Literatura na Świecie* 7-8 (2022): 367–375.

¹⁵John Ashbery, “Wstęp” [Introduction], in: John Ashbery, James Schuyler, *A Nest of Ninnies*, translated into Polish by Tadeusz Pióro, Andrzej Sosnowski (Warszawa: PIW, 2022), 5–9.

¹⁶Wiśniewski, 251.

spaces are presented as something completely unoriginal, within reach of everyone's experience. "Somehow (...) I had not expected Paris to be quite so much like Florida", says Fabia. "Yes (...), here, too, we have rain" answers Claire¹⁷. The protagonists, who eat, have love affairs, and gossip cordially, all while easily managing their everyday life (mostly selling various objects) are completely cliché. It is difficult to grow attached to or identify with them when we do not need to worry about their safety, and their minds are incapable of experiencing any deep dilemmas. For some reason, Schuyler and Ashbery chose this kind of "realism" and "novel" – a bourgeois form *par excellence*, as Sosnowski put it in his short essay entitled *Trash* which accompanied the Polish premiere of a fragment of the book published in 1992 in "Literatura na Świecie". However, *A Nest...* can hardly be recognized as such a type of prose. In the same essay, Sosnowski offers a whole range of references to experimental traditions in literature and art relevant to the book:

The action must be static like in Raymond Roussel, dialogue needs to consist of ready-mades, of language which is worn out, threadbare, used up, and resurrected for a moment – like a dead language, miraculously brought back to the times of its agony. The monotony and length of the book should satisfy Warhol. The effect will be unusually funny: it is perfect trash, *A Nest of Ninnies*, a comical, sophisticated novel, a campy treat, the most boring soap opera, a bizarre encounter of Ronald Firbank, *Rejs [Cruise]* and *Matysiakowie*¹⁸.

Likewise, the other translator, Tadeusz Pióro, identifies the experiments of New York's Dadaists as the starting point for the poetics of *A Nest of Ninnies* in his 2021 paper published in "Polish Journal of American Studies" (immediately before the Polish translation was published): "As several critics have observed, the language of the novel is its principal 'focalizer', even though – and this is the paradox I will try to unravel – this language seems to be as incidental as the novel's sketchy emplotment and cartoonish characterization. Or, I might also suggest, as Duchamp's ready-mades"¹⁹. He goes on:

the various "found objects" used by the Dadaists are linguistic, and could be roughly classed as crypto-quotations or paraphrases from a broad spectrum of literary works (from Trollope, Dickens or Austen to pulp fiction, as well as from a variety of poems), mid-century radio soap operas (Karin Hoffmann, Ashbery's biographer, singles out Vic and Sade as his favorite), and from the ways in which their parents and neighbors and friends spoke when the two poets were growing up in the thirties and forties. Of course, this does not exhaust the list of their inspirations. Yet the point of my comparison of Ashbery's and Schuyler's *objets trouvés* with the found objects of visual artists does not lie in the fortuitous recognition of potentially useful materials, but in the act or gesture performed by using them²⁰.

From the perspective of this paper, it should be said here that *A Nest of Ninnies*, funny prose by Ashbery and Schuyler from 1969, was already exhausted in its original version in two ways: as an intentionally failed novel about the life of the petty bourgeoisie, which bears all marks of trash, as well as an experiment referring to the avant-garde tradition in a gesture which repeats the dismantling of

¹⁷Ashbery, Schuyler, *A Nest of Ninnies*, 112. (English – 93)

¹⁸Andrzej Sosnowski, "Chwała" [Trash], *Literatura na Świecie* 8-9 (1992): 190.

¹⁹Pióro, 59.

²⁰Pióro, 61.

the bourgeoisie culture, avant-garde at its sources. As such, it subjects itself to criticism in the style of Jameson – social in principle, attacking the very essence of the avant-garde principles. And in our Polish case, we are additionally dealing with a translation. In the same paper, Pióro discusses similar doubts regarding *A Nest of Ninnies*, i.e. former Dadaists accusing younger generations of repeating neo-avant-garde gestures. For example, Hans Richter, the famous author of a history of Dadaism and one of its representatives, in a manner similar to Peter Bürger's, pointed out to the institutionalization of the avant-garde art and the peculiar emptiness of formalized gestures, deprived of an ideological or aesthetic impetus²¹. Pióro comments:

I am not competent to judge the fairness of his attack, but I know of many cases which show that it misses the point, or at least an important point which, in an old-fashioned manner, I would call the freedom of the artist, especially the freedom to mean nothing in particular, even as critics sweat over endowing that artist's works with some kind of relevance. It is precisely this kind of freedom that Ashbery and Schuyler exhibit, or flaunt, in their novel²².

However, when it comes to the Polish translation of *A Nest of Ninnies*, the conditions in which the ambiguous “novel” was translated, tightly connected to its literary legend, attract the biggest attention. This novel – as Sosnowski observes in an avant-garde way – “only wants to be itself”. Sosnowski refers to the famous formula by Paul Valéry, *The Marquise Went Out At Five O'clock*, which is bourgeois, deprived of novelty, and identical to itself in a “ready-made” way. It brings yet another significant if paradoxical interpretative context to *A Nest...*: a reference to conceptual art. How can we treat what happens to “ninnies” in terms of Perloff's “unoriginal” genius? Could we talk about art which “is only itself”, reducing or eliminating all (superfluous) references to reality as the “truth”, and simultaneously the existing source of meanings? In compliance with the rules which could be ascribed to conceptual abstraction – such elimination should take place up until the notion of art is reduced. From the perspective of pop art one could see clearly how cultural clichés, once they are subjected to replication, could remain subversive both of the directives of high modernism, founded on modern notions of individual genius, and of popular culture, immediately associated with Warhol's “candidness” of mass-produced replicas. However, *A Nest...* is not only a self-indicating cliché of bourgeois customs; neither was it created for engaged criticism of social reality. Both the novel and its translation stem from a (replicable) surplus, a certain “void” (of meaning) richness – negating the possibility of direct political rooting of the book in some social reality (in terms of Marxist criticism following Lukács or Lucien Goldman) – in the traditional role of a social mirror, and simultaneously a tool of critical self-reflection. This does not mean that *A Nest...* – both the original and its translated version – is devoid of critical value. Ironic reworking of the “faithfulness” convention – reflection and translation – closely tie the book with the reality of creative work.

Schuyler and Ashbery – as we learn from the latter's introduction – began their work on *A Nest...* in 1952, and soon suspended it following Ashbery's 10-year-long Fulbright scholarship in Paris, where he was going to write his doctoral dissertation on Roussel. That period is interrupted by

²¹Cited after Pióro, 61. Hans Richter, *Dadaizm [Dadaism]*, translated into Polish by Jacek Stanisław Buras (Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, 1986), 346–363.

²²Pióro, 61–62.

a meeting in 1957/58, during which the two poets continued their work while sharing an apartment in New York: “The fact that the apartment was a sixth-floor walk-up whose rent was \$57 a month may have contributed to the relatively affluent lifestyles we bestowed on our characters”²³. As has been mentioned, the fact that they started working on the novel – with a paraphrase from *Alice in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll (“Alice was very tired”) – was a coincidence. They took turns writing the text, at first switching after each sentence, and later after whole passages – however, they were unable to do it when they were apart, for instance via letters. The Polish translation of *A Nest...* gains an additional advantage from the perspective of Polish readers: apart from Ashbery’s introduction Polish publication gains an afterword by the Polish translators. In that text, Sosnowski and Pióro focus on... themselves, or rather on the conditions in which their work took place, which seems unimportant for the main text. From this perspective, the afterword constitutes a peculiar, extremely personal, literal replication of the introduction. It has a literally-repetitive, replicating, self-indicating relationship with the creative reality. The two translators fill this “farse in pure form” in the avant-garde way: with their own lives. It is revealed that the translation of *A Nest...* was both a procedural and total activity. First, Pióro and Sosnowski stress that the decision to translate *A Nest...* was a coincidence; they highlight their lack of time for that work, and inform in detail how many breaks they took and how long they were. The whole process took exactly 20 years, from 1992 to 2022 – three years more than it took to write *A Nest of Ninnies*. One example of the translators’ struggles, who started their work in Jadwisin by Zalew Zegrzyński, and finished in a “lodge” in Mierzvice (Podlaskie voivodeship), is the lack of water for drinking and washing, which necessitated trips to Serock in order to purchase bottled water Kampinos. Just as was the case of Schuyler and Ashbery, the two translators returned to their shared efforts twice – as evidenced by subsequent fragments published in “Literatura na Świecie” in 1997 and 2007²⁴. Eventually, they finished during the COVID pandemic – a special time of a surplus of time and richness resulting from the busy pandemic idleness. The afterword provides hardly any literary references which would serve as a pretextual point of reference, facilitating understanding of this “boring” book which “goes nowhere” and “only wants to be itself”. Neither will we find reassurances that *A Nest...* contributes to extending the scope of the Polish language, or constitutes an important element of the “Polish” canon of the world literature.

The mobility of the text and its translation is also realized through the changing circumstances of a certain, procedurally self-assigned artistic gesture. Therefore, the transcreation of Ashbery’s introduction in the afterword takes place in a special way, on two surfaces – of the text and of the sphere of creative activities, and the “literary life” incorporated into the text. Finally, it should be observed that a peculiar, parodistic distortion of the original takes place there – i.e., a gesture which could be treated in terms of a conceptually Dadaist quotation. Obviously, the Polish ready-made has to change its meaning in the new context of the performative game with a work of art. As Ashbery wrote:

I finally moved back to the U.S. for good at the end of 1965. By that time I had a publisher, Hold, and a sympathetic editor, Arthur Cohen. He eventually asked the question that editors of poets

²³Ashbery, “Introduction”, 6.

²⁴John Ashbery, James Schuyler, “A Nest of Ninnies”, translated into Polish by Tadeusz Pióro, Andrzej Sosnowski, *Literatura na Świecie* 6 (1997): 146–151; John Ashbery, James Schuyler, *A Nest of Ninnies*, translated into Polish by Tadeusz Pióro, Andrzej Sosnowski, *Literatura na Świecie* 5-6 (2007): 265–277.

often get around to: “Have you ever thought of writing a novel?”. I remembered Jimmy’s and my collaboration, which by this time we seldom thought of, and described it to Arthur, who was interested. This proved the stimulus we needed, and we began working on it”²⁵.

In the afterword we find a reversed, mirrored order – transcreation in the place of creation:

As soon as news about our job being finished spread across Poland, we started to receive phone calls: from ambitious publishing agents and academics, experts in camps and effects of the “surface” game against the background of the lack of “depth”. Meanwhile, one should not forget that the novel was written mostly for the average reader, who enjoys the surface and dislikes depth, which may predict the commercial cusses of *A Nest of Ninnies*²⁶.

One could say that it is not just the afterword that is a peculiar (mirrored) replication of the introduction to the unoriginal translation of an unoriginal book. Maybe the two poets did not think of faithfully recreating the conditions in which the (*de facto* unoriginal) original was written. Their translation being repetitive of the book’s repetitiveness, and yet congenial in its own repetitiveness (an idea which is conceptual at its core) – the circumstances of the transcreational event: all this is simply too funny to be true, and seems too true to be just for fun. A total translation results from an idea for total creation – total artificiality of a conceptual artefact, which only “thinks” about itself and does not require any explanations. The creation of *A Nest...* – imitating redundancy, excess and boredom, and solemn existential emptiness of the protagonists’ existence, who fill the novel with their idle lives, in a rich extravagant gesture – deserves to be answered with a rich, extrvagant and at the same time redundant, and superfluous translation. In a world where everything and everyone tries to prove how necessary and useful they are, motivated by the need to remain on the surface of the public debate, it could be said that the useless, jocular *A Nest...* should become a thorn in the foot of the world’s mainstream. Obviously, such a subtle way of thinking about subversiveness is risky – soft resistance can be unnoticeable.

Using categories proposed by Perloff, I dubbed the Polish translation a transcreation (following Harold de Campos). I believe that this artistic activity is characteristic of the late avant-garde, produced when even replicating concepts of twentieth-century art were exhausted. However, a “transcreational” activity, for which even Cage’s “writing through” someone else’s text can be a context, constitutes an obvious seedbed for differences. In today’s Poland, the translation of *A Nest of Ninnies* not only could not hope for commercial success, but even for any regular interest of critics. Same was the case with the original – although for different reasons. Neither did the Polish translation revive the interest in the American neo-avant-garde or the works by Ashbery and O’Hara, who have been associated with the “postmodern” poetry of the New York School of Poets since the early 1990s. Even the critical discussion surrounding the “incomprehensibility” of the dense poetics by authors from the circle of “Literatura na Świecie” has seemed to end for some time now. The lack of a plot, cliché character, American “shallowness” (difficult to emulate), and the almost complete – at least for less vigilant readers – transparency of the text (except for occasional, Rousellan provocations) all contribute to the fact that this book could not be simply translated – just

²⁵Ashbery, “Introduction”, 6.

²⁶Tadeusz Pióro, Andrzej Sosnowski, A translators’ note, in: Ashbery, Schuyler, *A Nest of Ninnies*, 240.

as the original text could not be simply written. Sosnowski refers to the whole project as “laborious”; however, the afterword adds details which may discredit this laboriousness:

On our first day at Zalew Zegrzyński, having had a few drinks for courage, we risked the first, three-word-long sentence: “Alicja była zmęczona” [Alice was tired]. It was a good start, and soon, as we were watching birds in excellent moods, we came up with the title. Then it got even better; we saw the bottled water Kampinos (tasty, by the way) in the light of the word *camp*²⁷.

Sosnowski shared in “Literatura na Świecie” that they had decided to divide the work between them: Pióro translated exclusively passages by Schuyler, and Sosnowski – Ashbery’s. The major issue with this division was to identify the author of the source text. Indeed, the surface of this prose is highly coherent, so it is easy to imagine that the task must have been complicated. It is equally difficult to evaluate its effectiveness; it could be tested by identifying sentences translated by Sosnowski and those translated by Pióro while also considering its redundancy and the futility of such a self-imposed interpretative effort. Bearing this in mind, it is easier to understand what they said: “[...] we are prepared for the worst. Also, the mockery of usual and unusual readers due to an outrageous omission, i.e. the lack of one, complete chapter... Although we knew from the start that the said chapter could not be translated, we tried... And we had to give up”²⁸. As a result, chapter thirteen remains a mystery. If they had succeeded, it may have become the best one in the Polish version – however, its omission changes nothing. As Wystan Hugh Auden said, “Poetry makes nothing happen”. *A Nest of Ninnies* constitutes a performative confirmation of his words, in the Dadaist and conceptually hopeful translation.

If we understand the whole translation in terms of a long-lasting artistic happening which takes place in the real life of two authors who take a collective responsibility of an experiment spanning years, we should pay attention to the fact that the Polish translation is not an isolated replica of the American literary game. It would rather be about continuing a significant tradition of New York writing within “an entanglement of translations”, whose significant meaning is not exhausted by the notion of intertextuality. American translations of works by Raymond Roussel, translated into Polish by Andrzej Sosnowski, would be the most obvious continuation of such an artistic activity – or a performatively understood procedure of “a masterpiece” rather than text itself. In his essay on Roussel, first published in fragments as the afterword to the Polish edition of *Locus Solus* in 1998, Sosnowski discusses how representatives of the New York School of Poets accidentally encounter Roussel’s work in Paris in 1950²⁹. For Kenneth Koch it was a coincidence in a surrealist sense, which happened while he was searching for “something exciting and crazy”. The book in question was *Impressions d’Afrique* published in 1932, which Koch later showed to Ashbery and others. Therefore, the latter’s encounter with Roussel was less of a coincidence: he went to Paris to write a doctoral dissertation on Roussel, and later, in 1961-1962, Ashbery, Schuyler, Koch and Harry Matthews edited a magazine entitled “Locus Solus”, where they published (among other things) poems inspired by Roussel. Sosnowski’s essay – a poet and Ashbery’s translator – can be understood as a dual tribute: to the procedural

²⁷Pióro, Sosnowski, 238.

²⁸Pióro, Sosnowski, 240–241.

²⁹See Andrzej Sosnowski, “Ah... Roussel”, in Sosnowski: “Najryzykowniej” [In the riskiest way] (Wrocław: Biuro Literackie, 2011).

machinery of Roussel's surrealism, and to broadly understood work by American translations, and finally, as an expression of fascination which he shared with New York authors. The first translation of works by Roussel was published in Trevor Winkfield's magazine "Julliard" in 1969 (the title is another reference to a protagonist of *Impressions d'Afrique*). The translators' efforts resulted in a collective edition of translated works by Roussel, *How I Wrote Certain of My Books*, published in 1995, with an introduction by John Ashbery (before that there were two editions of the titular book, in 1975 and 1977, both translated by Trevor Winkfield, a poet and painter influenced by Roussel). The collective edition contains 59 illustrations by Henri-Achille Zo commissioned by Roussel. It comprises fragments of *Nouvelles Impressions...* (famously translated by Koch, who used multi-level embedded sentences), a few pages from *Impressions d'Afrique*, and a long excerpt from *Documents to Serve as an Outline* translated by Ashbery³⁰. The latter was translated by Andrzej Sosnowski and published by Biuro Literackie in 2008. *Nouvelles impressions d'Amérique*, Sosnowski's 1994, is a form of poststructuralist "decalcomania" of *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique*. In his own, "original" book, Sosnowski incorporated all illustrations by Henri-Achille Zo, simultaneously transcreating, translating, and rewriting Roussel's instructions for the illustrator. Sosnowski's poetic prose, known from his Polish translation of *Four Poems* (2012), which introduced Polish readers to Ashbery's work, connects him to Roussel. Ashbery's *The Vermont Notebook* (1975) with the illustrations of Joe Brainard (has not been translated into Polish yet), just as Sosnowski's *Nouvelles Impressions...*, is an experimental travelogue.

A Nest of Ninnies is also a transcreation – and not only in reference to the bourgeoisie, moral cliché. In one of the first reviews, Auden – who, contrary to other, highly critical readers, wrote favorably on novel – wrote about its "campy" aftertaste, comparing it to *The Flower Beneath the Foot* by Ronald Firbank. Mikołaj Wiśniewski's excellent, long chapter from his *Nowy Jork i okolice* [New York and its surroundings], devoted to *A Nest...*, is also based on associations and theses referring to camp. A pair of potential, subliminally hidden homosexual protagonists of the novel deserves special attention; according to him, their love for the *petit bourgeois* aesthetic, i.e. all kinds of trinkets, dressing up, and pointless, idle chatter, can be associated with the poetics of Frank O'Hara's poems. Citing Bruce Boone, Wiśniewski writes: "O'Hara simply talks like a gay man. In other words, he sounds like a homosexual person having a conversation. This concerns a conversational style characteristic of a chatter understood as a pleasant and «unserious» social activity, something similar to gossiping"³¹. The chatter is "more about «how» than «what», it is about an exchange of sentences, which cannot be either intentional or educational – it is, first and foremost (as Boone puts it) pleasant – the pleasure results from skillfully playing a game of allusions with the interlocutor, from «curveballing», i.e. clever jumping from one subject to another"³². From my perspective – i.e. questions regarding the social intervention in neo- and post-avant-garde activities – it is significant how Wiśniewski introduces *Notes On "Camp"* by Susan Sontag:

The protagonists of *A Nest...* affirm what is against "masculine" values, such as political engagement, work, progress, production and reproduction. They gleefully parade their uselessness [...]

³⁰See Terence Diggory, *Encyclopedia of the New York School Poets* (New York: Facts on File, 2009), "Raymond Roussel" and other related entries.

³¹Cited after Wiśniewski, 267. Bruce Boone, "Gay Language as Political Praxis. The Poetry of Frank O'Hara", *Social Text* 1 (1979), 80.

³²Wiśniewski, 267.

The “Ninnies” are characterized by triviality (of conversations, behaviors, ambitions) which is in opposition to the “serious occupations” and interests of “real men”³³.

The Flower Beneath the Foot clearly belongs to the same constellation as Roussel’s prose translated into Polish by Sosnowski, and which Ashbery characterized (citing Alain Robbe-Grillet) as: “Raymond Roussel has nothing to say, and he says it badly”, adding that “[...] In other words, it is a totally neutral medium for the ‘nothing’ he is telling us. One can’t help recalling John Cage’s remark, ‘I have nothing to say / and I am saying it / and that is / poetry / as I need it’³⁴. References to *In Search of Lost Time* by Marcel Proust, with which I started this essay, a masterpiece in terms of performing “nothing”, could establish a context for both *A Nest of Ninnies* and its Polish translation. There is only a handful of such references in *Gniazdko...*, and they are typically superficial, pretextual. At the beginning of chapter two, Fabia reads *Albertine Gone*, declaring that she can stop at any moment – although the reason she gives is at odds with the situation of a polite chatter which distracted her from reading: “I don’t want ever to finish Proust”³⁵. While travelling to Italy, baroness Oscari asks Fabia how she likes *I Promesi Sposi*, and Fabia answers that she will never comprehend why Memmo associates Manzoni with Proust. And yet the walks, trips, conversations about art and love, meals and flaunting, idle chatter and peculiarities of the protagonists, as well as the constant sense of satiation and lack, and finally, the distancing and ironic attitude to the represented reality from the narrative’s perspective, and a certain randomness of events comprising the plot – all that can offer associations with *In Search of Lost Time*. Perhaps Proust’s novel is ironically and provocatively transcreated in *A Nest...*, which presents the world of the 1950s and 1960s suburban bourgeois elites into its own measure, in a gesture which is similarly soft, but settling accounts – which is what Proust did to the French elites. However, for transcreation, it is always the perspective of a total translation – and an equally total difference – that would give meaning:

[...] Mrs. Kelso made sure that no one escaped the watermelon-rind pickle or the corn dodgers which the maid was circulating. “What are your plans when you get back to France?”, Victor asked Claire as the clouds of steam subsided. “First I shall go to Vichy, to meet my two cousins there. We are projecting a little trip through the Massif Central. Then it’s back to the sweatshops of the Faubourg Sant-Honoré. For once Fabia unbent a little toward Claire. “Tell me,” she said, “is Proust very different in French?, “I wouldn’t know,” Claire said. “That is, I have never read him in English, only in French. However,” she added somewhat more indulgently, “I shouldn’t be surprised if there was, indeed, a great difference”³⁶.

translated by Paulina Zagórska

³³Wiśniewski, 265.

³⁴John Ashbery, “The Bachelor Machines of Raymond Roussel”, translated into Polish by Andrzej Sosnowski, in Sosnowski: *Inne tradycje* [Other traditions], foreword by Grzegorz Jankowicz (Kraków: Korporacja Ha!art, 2008), 83–84. English version: 67–68.

³⁵Ashbery, Schuyler, *A Nest of Ninnies*, 19.

³⁶Ashbery, Schuyler, *A Nest of Ninnies*, 87. English version: 73

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KEYWORDS

TRANSCREATION

avant-garde

ABSTRACT:

The essay discusses the Polish version of *A Nest of Ninnies* (1969) by John Ashbery and James Schuyler, translated by Tadeusz Pióro and Andrzej Sosnowski, with Marjorie Perloff's "unoriginal genius" in the neo-avant-garde as the reference point. The essay also refers to the category of transcreation and the art of translation, which constituted a negation of historical categories of originality and innovativeness, typically associated with the notion of the avant-garde – the source of American modernism in poetry.

Pióro and Sosnowski

retro-garde

total translation

ASHBERY AND SCHUYLER

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(Neo)avant-garde co-creating poetry with the body. On the (im)possible love affair of literature and virtual reality on the example of VR “Nightsss”*

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VR literature – an (im)possible love affair?

Virtual reality allows to trick the mind. By putting on special goggles (often equipped with a pair of good headphones and additional sensors), the user (immersant) is cut off from real-world stimuli and immerses in a manufactured, artificial (virtual) reality. It is as if they are (tele)present in two places (and often also in two bodies) at the same time. Their actual actions (e.g. moving through space) are reflected in the simulated world. Therefore, paving the way through, experiments with, and attempts at fraternizing with this fascinating new technology by various arts have been analysed for years. To be specific, there are discussions about the VR theater (or rather applying VR in the theater¹), immersive VR works that permit enter inside the world of paintings, exhibitions held in VR², as well as the so-called VR sculpture³. There are

¹ There are performances for individual viewers (Tanahill), as well as shows during which either the whole audience, or selected audience members wear goggles (Garbaczewski).

² The VR art gallery, curated by Katarzyna Koba and Kamila Sitak, is an interesting Polish example.

³ E.g. acclaimed works by Mez Breeze (who is sometimes – incorrectly – considered an icon of XR literature).

also interesting VR experiments with music (both in terms of concerts realized/transmitted in virtual spaces, and music for individual listening in which the user's body becomes an instrument for creating music thanks to using trackers). Even opera can be experienced in VR. The cinematic VR (with its own festivals⁴) and the dynamically growing VR gaming market do not even require an extensive comment. VR is also applied in education and marketing. But do we ever consider what the "love affair" of VR and literature looks like (or could look like)? In 2020 Brooke Belisle and Paul Roquet did not include literature in arts which can experiment with VR⁵. However, in the present paper I would like to add literature to the discussion.

We can talk about VR experiences characterized by formally varied adaptations of literature – from classic cinematic VR (e.g. *The Great C* [2018] based on a short story by Philip K. Dick) to more interactive projects (e.g. an adaptation of *Transformation* by Franz Kafka directed by Mike Johnson [2018], or *Wolves in The Walles*, an acclaimed adaptation of a picture book by Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean). The Polish *Kosmogonik* by Marta and Paweł Szarzyński – an adaptation of a short story by Stanisław Lem – is another interesting example (the authors have confirmed that the series will be continued, exploring more possibilities of VR interactions).

Experiments with poetry also have quite a long tradition (although in this case we should ask whether these are adaptations/remediations). The attractiveness of this form is also confirmed by including a whole series of "poems animated in the virtual reality" by Willem de Kooning Academy students in the program of 52nd Poetry International Festival in Rotterdam (June 2022). VR experiences featuring poetry which appear (and are awarded) in festivals are also highly varied formally. *Canticle* by Samanta Gorman is an installation using CAVE technology, a poetic performance using VR (based on *Song of Solomon* and poems by Gorman), in which a professional dancer, Amina Chremos, interacts with the text in VR, and the audience – outside of CAVE – can only read the text resulting from a physical interaction of the dancer with words. Works such as *Water Cave* by Andy Campbell offer individual experiences – in this case, a journey through a landscape comprising visual (a river flowing through a cave) and typographic (lyrics of a poem about dealing with depression) elements. Although it does not provide any special interaction, there are others which to a greater or lesser degree also incorporate the recipient's gestures or even their whole body, such as *Monoliths* by Pilot Theatre (although the extent of interaction is modest), or *Nightsss*, which engages the reader's whole body.

Simultaneously, although there are examples of narrative VR experiences thematizing literature and reading (*Abandoned Library*, Andy Campbell, Judi Alston), VR prose is a more difficult issue. Where to draw the line between a "simple" VR experience and a literary one? If we assume the use of typography as the key, the project *Screen*, in which the user-player fights with memories falling apart, which – written on three walls of CAVE – are being destroyed more and more quickly, considered to be the canon of electronic literature, would be an icon⁶.

⁴ Such festivals clearly show how VR is evolving as a medium. The so-called classic cinematic VR is becoming less and less common every year.

⁵ Brooke Belisle, Paul Roquet, "Guest Editors' Introduction: Virtual reality: immersion and empathy", *Journal of Visual Culture* 19 (2020): 5, DOI 10.1177/1470412920906258.

⁶ Within digital literature, XR literature is considered a representative of the so-called fourth wave (there is little critical consideration regarding this category).

Nonetheless, it would be difficult to accept this assumption, devoting this paper to a VR poem which contains not a single written word. VR is a relatively new medium, which is still working out its language and poetics, drawing from the experience of other media, testing various older solutions which can be found within them (e.g. examining narratives in VR from the perspective of both literary studies and media studies seems enticing⁷). Initially, equating VR exclusively with cinematic VR was a limitation, as it did not allow to capture the essence of the medium. Limiting oneself to the category of “VR literature” is equally unfair, and it can (although does not always have to) even be restrictive, impeding the ability to see the key aspects of a given work. However, it is feasible to characterize the relationships between VR and various arts (including literature) or cultural spaces, also closely inspecting the benefits result from them for both sides, while respecting the separateness of the medium. Hence my idea to discuss a “love affair” between VR and literature, whose fruit can take different forms, not limited only to literature made for reading (?) wearing dedicated goggles.

What else is positioned beyond the fixed framework of “VR literature”? The technology is also used for promoting literature and reading (e.g. a VR 360 video by Graham Sack promoting *Lincoln in the Bardo* by Graham Saunders⁸ or – for younger viewers – *Zero Gravity Lunar Library* by Dreaming Methods), as well as for educational purposes (*Shelley’s Creation* offers a multi-user experience of learning about the origins of *Frankenstein*). There are also archiving projects, such as *Digital Fiction Curios*, a digital archive of electronic literature created with Flash (so-called Flash literature), realized by a team Andy Campbell and Judi Alston were part of.. Not to mention the fact that VR is becoming a space for literary meetings and discussions – for example, the Poetry Cove community uses it⁹; there are also literary performances in VR (e.g. Illya Szilak organized one in VRchat). Although it may seem impossible, the “love affair” I have in mind seems to be rather fertile, and only a small part of its fruit could be considered VR literature, or rather: VR experiences of literary provenance/dominant/character.

Reader’s full body immersion

If there is VR literature, what would reading in VR be like? Probably... inconvenient. Let us consider how many book lovers are comfortable with gaming consoles or VR headsets. And for those unfamiliar with VR, turning pages or even holding a text in VR is quite a challenge. Moreover, despite technological developments, identifying letters and putting them together in VR (especially in the case of longer texts) is not an easy, enjoyable task. Why bother if a book (or an e-book) has a more convenient interface? However, perhaps dealing with VR literature has other advantages? If VR offers the so-called full body immersion, whose cardinal rule – as we are reminded by Janet Murray – is thinking about the user’s body in space¹⁰, we can talk about embodied reading in this context.

⁷ If the film studies narrative theory is based on literary studies, it is unsurprising that another medium is working out its critical apparatus based on both its predecessors.

⁸ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=phuCt50Jck8>.

⁹ Teddy Coward, “Meter, Verse: How the Poetry Community is Embracing VR”, Why Now (1.02.2022), <https://whynow.co.uk/read/meter-verse-how-the-poetry-community-is-embracing-virtual-reality>.

¹⁰ Janet Murray, “Not a Film and Not an Empathy Machine. How necessary failures will help VR designers invent new storyforms”. Medium (6.10.2016), <https://immerse.news/not-a-film-and-not-an-empathy-machine-48b63b0eda93>.

Hence “VR literature” and reading in VR would be connected to poetics of hapticity, or even – as I would add using the broad category discussed by Marta Smolińska – of extended hapticity¹¹.

Literature is often perceived as a purely intellectual act, deprived of physicality, what Thomas McLaughlin neatly summed up in the title of one of the chapters of his book devoted to the analysis of reading practices *I’m Not Here: The Reading Body in Physical and Social Space*¹². However, even McLaughlin limits himself only to hypertexts and e-book readers in his characterization of new media texts¹³, completely omitting those types of electronic literature which explore the issue of incorporating the reader’s body in the reading process. Stories written for mobile devices (especially touchscreens), using readers’ gestures for pushing the plot forwards (e.g. *WuWu&Co, Imaginary*), or literary locative narratives (and sometimes also ambient literature), “borrow” recipients’ bodies, tying together the act of reading with physical presence or moving the body in actual space (e.g. *Breathe, Her Long Black Hair*).

Analyzing those texts (and the forms they represent), as well as the poetics of readers’ gestures are beyond the scope of this paper¹⁴. However, my goal is to extend the continuously developing discussions (which have been described quite extensively, both for Polish and foreign texts) with the topic which so far has been rather absent from them. I would like to consider how literature (and readers) can benefit from engaging their whole bodies in reading, and investigate what full body immersion can actually mean in experiencing reading. Hence I look into the poetics of embodying in literary texts realized using VR technologies.

I am going to illustrate my considerations with VR *Nightsss* directed by Weronika Lewandowska and Sandra Frydrysiak – an experience which invites the user-reader to a unique act of reading poetry, although it does not contain a single letter. Realized in VnLab at Łódź Film School, it is usually erroneously presented and analyzed in the context of VR film, and seldom (if ever) considered as an example of electronic literature. In this essay, I would like to read this project from this perspective, proposing a significant addition to discussions about VR *Nightsss*.

Practising not only on paper. Omitted contexts of reading and production of VR *Nightsss*

Although such a conceptualization is certainly logical, it would be an oversimplification to say that VR *Nightsss* is an (intermedia, transmedia) adaptation of Lewandowska’s spoken-word poem, which has been presented internationally for years now. However, if the power of this experience lies only in rendering a recording of Lewandowska reciting the poem through a different medium, then why were Przemek Danowski and Marcin Macuk awarded the prestigious Best VR

¹¹Marta Smolińska, *Haptyczność poszerzona. Zmysł dotyku w sztuce drugiej połowy XX i początku XXI wieku [Extended hapticity. Touch in the art of the second half of the 20th century and early 21st century]* (Kraków: Universitas, 2020).

¹²Thomas Mc Laughlin, *Reading and the Body: The Physical Practice of Reading* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 109.

¹³Mc Laughlin, 163–194.

¹⁴I have already written on the category of readers’ gestures and kinetic, embodied reading. The present text is limited to the themes necessary to the analysis of the haptic dimension of reading *Nightsss*.

Sound Design Award during Cinequest, an independent film festival – and not Lewandowska? It cannot be denied that originally *Nightsss* was spoken-word, danced and performed by the poet with her whole body; there was also a music video realized with plan.kton, in which dynamic typographic, abstract visualizations overlapped with the image of Lewandowska performing (at times manipulating words or throwing words out of her mouth), then followed by a VR experience, from which – it should be stressed – the performer’s body disappears completely. Somewhere on the way *Nightsss* became also a visual poem, published in “Ha!art”, but Lewandowska did not participate in the production of that typographic version. However, when asked about the use of dynamic VR typography, Lewandowska said: “I was completely uninterested”¹⁵ – even though she did not refrain from such experiments in the past.

Because there has been one more version of *Nightsss* – its French translation presented in April 2012 at Wieczór Formy Poetyckiej [Evening of Poetic Form], an online vernissage at galeriawdomu.pl¹⁶. The aim of that meeting was to present a series of experiments with new forms of communication testing their possible applications in poetry. “My name is Weronika Lewandowska, I write poems [...]. For galeriawdomu.pl I will try to learn how to use visual programs and thus [...] say something in a new way” – Lewandowska declared¹⁷. Such experiments characterize also later (team)work on VR *Nightsss*. If the VR experience realized in VnLab is analyzed in the context of Lewandowska’s earlier work, the path she had walked to arrive at the point where she started asking questions about the possible use of VR and full bodyimmersion in literary experiences is clearly visible. The artist (whodoes not describe herself as a one-medium artist nor assign herself to only one art area) stresses that “I have not arrived at VR from nowhere”. Indeed, neither has she arrived at spoken-word from nowhere.

Exploring the medium – testing its possibilities, examining the limits of the language/s of art – seems to be the dominant of Lewandowska’s work¹⁸. Some of her texts (*Nightsss* is not an isolated case) are evolving, realized through different media. However, this is not about adapting old work to new forms, but rather a ceaseless search for better ways of artistic communication (because Lewandowska – as she confesses in *Nightsss* – “cannot be contained” in language). Urszula Pawlicka summarizes this neatly: “Crush, encirclement, a sense of not having enough space can mostly be referred to the poetic form chosen by Lewandowska. She cannot be contained in a verbal text, which may seem monolithic, not expressive enough, or monotonous”¹⁹. Neither is she contained within

¹⁵quoted from an extensive interview with Lewandowska conducted in 2021 (unpublished).

¹⁶The gallery held a whole cycle of such meetings, during which artists presented their work online and could talk to participants.

¹⁷Contrary to what Mariusz Pisarski states, it is the poems presented at Wieczór Formy Poetyckiej, preceding VR *Nightsss* by a decade, that should be compared to Katarzyna Giełżyńska’s cycle C(ON)DU IT (published in the same year when Lewandowska’s vernissage took place), presented as precursory and included in the third volume of Electronic Literature Collection, a cyclic publication whose aim is to set the canon of international electronic literature. See Mariusz Pisarski, “Podmianianie ciała: reinkarnacje «Nocccy» Weroniki Lewandowskiej” [Replacing bodies: reincarnations of «Nocccy» by Weronika Lewandowska], *Techsty* 12 (2022), <https://techsty.art.pl/m12/noccc.html>.

¹⁸Not only Wieczór Formy Poetyckiej (discussed further in this text) had the dimension of such attempts, but also the “artistic, not commercial” research project of the multimedia adaptation of *Finnegans Wake: First We Feel Then We Fall* by Jakub Wróblewski and Katarzyna Bazarnik, in which the artist was engaged (<https://www.firstwefeelthenwefall.com/>). It is also present in the film about Baczyński directed by Kordian Piwowarski (with whom Lewandowska worked on plan.kton projects), as it incorporated fragments from a poetic slam organized to celebrate the poet’s 90th birthday (those performances were supposed to modernize his words, convey them in a way closer to how they would be received by his contemporaries).

¹⁹Urszula Pawlicka, “Nie mieszczę się w tekście” [I cannot be contained in a text], *Ha!art* (15.07.2012), <https://web.archive.org/web/20120715063347/http://ha.art.pl/felietony/2427-urszula-pawlicka-nie-mieszczesz-sie-w-tekscie.html>.

the limits of traditionally understood sensuality, her art is peculiarly synesthetic (let me remind that the name of Lewandowska's artistic blog at Tumblr is *Język w uchu* [Tongue in the ear]). The lyrical subject of *z.BAL.my.słów* (2011) – who can clearly be identified as Lewandowska – repeats: “My lips are in my ears / my fingers are in my eyes / my ears are in my fingers / yesterday is in my skin / my eyes are in my mouth”. It is unsurprising that for a subject who perceives the world in such a way, gradually the body – entangled in relationships with the space, necessary not only in spoken-word, but also in VR experiences – becomes the key to understanding reality²⁰.

In 2012, Lewandowska also said: “I am searching for space for poems, in which they could exist completely differently”, adding that she was thinking about “space in which one can immerse and read poetry in a completely different way”. She also explained that “I think this is where the need to not only recite poetry on stage, but also to look for some visuality, with which I could present poems in a completely different medium comes from”²¹. The animations accompanying performances with *plan.kton* (defined as an „audiovisual performance”)²² have become such a new visuality. In a postcard poem (one of the formats which Lewandowska sometimes used in visual texts resembling the poetics of Marinetti's poems), realized for the purpose of *Wieczór Formy Poetyckiej* as a (less legible due to its music video character) animation, on the verbal level, Lewandowska summarizes this search in new poetic spaces in the following way: “I do not have a workshop I have my own and public space empty full where the WORD has TIME and is a dynamic sign”.

The French lyrics of *Nightsss* surely became such dynamic signs. That realization does not feature the dancer we know from VR, inviting us to dance together. The typographic performance takes place by itself in front of the reader, without their participation (which is typical for the second generation of digital poetry). White (at times – light blue) letters are dancing, producing the text on a black screen, lightning it up like stars. The tempo of their movements (sometimes they are completely static) plays along with the lyrical situation: it speeds up and whirls, reflecting erotic excitement. Although the text states that “time stopped / stopped on my lips”²³, the words describing a kiss are by no means static – they are whirling on the screen, reflecting the lyrical subject's emotions with their dynamic movements (similarly, the opening lines of the poem “I run away flow on my skin”²⁴ are also running across the screen). Typographic elations reach the zenith at „sweeping past upstairs/clouds are inside myself/I am dropping on the floor/I am dropping on him/I am dropping on the sky/falling falling nearby/distance where we started/were born by it pushed myself/to you”. In the finale, repetitions of the words “świt” [twilight] and “dzień” [day] gradually obscure the earlier text, brightening the screen – which is yet another example of using the possibilities offered by dynamic typography (mostly movement of letters and the

²⁰ At least in the type of experiences which interest Lewandowska and in what realizations she engages herself.

²¹ In the same interview Lewandowska pointed out that the multimediality (audiovisual character) of her work results from (among others) dealing with new media on a daily basis (then: the computer) and “having something beyond a sheet of paper”, summing up that “poems start to mix with a completely new medium”.

²² The project, realized with a band, was soon appreciated abroad.

²³ This is an untranslatable word play based on the homonymity between “usta” [stopped] and “usta” [lips] [PZ]. In international contexts poem was always presented in Bohdan Piasecki's translation, which is also quoted in this article.

²⁴ This is another untranslatable word play based on the homonymity between “uciekam” [I am running away] and “ściekam” [dripping down] [PZ].

dynamics of this movement) in order to reinforce, illustrate, or add senses to the poem²⁵. VR *Nightsss* goes further, “visuphors” (as Lewandowska dubbed visual metaphors²⁶) are becoming spatial and open to physical interaction²⁷. Simultaneously, the very concept of translating the dynamics of an erotic poem into a (real) dynamics of words, or – like in a VR experience – an onomatopoeic landscape, remains unchanged. Shifting from experiencing poetry with a forgotten, immobilized body to the full physical immersion is what changes significantly.

From spoken-word to VR: on replacing bodies and subjects

So far, in discussions about VR *Nightsss*, on the level of directing the experience, claiming that Lewandowska is responsible for the project’s poetics, and Frydrysiak – the dimension of dance, seems to be an oversimplification. Research into immersive experiences connected the two artists, and although – contrary to Frydrysiak – Lewandowska did not focus on dance, it has always been an important element of her work. Space, movement and the body are inherent elements in many of Lewandowska’s performances, who – appreciated for her intuitive way of using the body – was invited to partner with one of the leading contemporary choreographers. Additionally, Lewandowska used to be a dancer in one of PanGenerator collective’s projects

Spoken-word is also about playing a poem out with the body. In an interview about the slams and vernissage for galeriawdomu.pl with Agata Kołodziej, Lewandowska stressed that being in touch, creative action – both live and in a space, with the audience, is what attracts her the most. “I need a filled space and space for filling” – she said²⁸. Although her body disappears from VR *Nightsss*, this does not mean that the experience of poetry is disembodied. To the contrary – full body immersion remains the dominant. However, as Mariusz Pisarski put it, a “replacement of bodies” takes place²⁹: the lyrical “I” (in earlier realizations identified as the “I” reading the text³⁰) is replaced with the experiencing “I”. The immersant’s body takes over the role of artist’s body.

Hence the absence of the body of the speaking “I” in the experience makes space for the recipient (and their body) – a “hole” in the score, left for the immersant to play out. In this case, the

²⁵According to Lewandowska, this version of *Nightsss* was meant to be presented on three screens, which would allow to make the experience even more immersive in the (multidimensional) space of the text and the image enriching it (the text is accompanied by three burning bushes, aesthetically similar to the bushes from VR *Nightsss*).

²⁶Anna Tatarska, “Debiutantki z Polski pokonały 14 tys. konkurentów. Ich erotyczny film VR ma premierę na prestiżowym festiwalu” [Polish debutants beat 14,000 competitors. Their erotic VR film premieres at a prestigious festival], *Gazeta Wyborcza* (29.01.2021), <https://wyborcza.pl/7,101707,26736058,debiutantki-z-polski-pokonaly-14-tys-konkurentow-ich-erotyczny.html>.

²⁷During a meeting about poetry and VR organized soon after the international premiere of *Nightsss* (in February 2021, hence it was held via Zoom due to COVID), Lewandowska mentioned that when she started to think about experimenting with the new technology, she initially considered using it for experimenting with a different poem from the same cycle – *rybami srebrzyste ławice* [shoals silver with fish] (a stop-motion animation realized with mixed media techniques).

²⁸Agata Kołodziej, “«Potrzebuję przestrzeni wypełnionej i do wypełnienia» – rozmowa z Weroniką Lewandowską” [I need a filled space and space for filling – an interview with Weronika Lewandowska], in: *Najlepszy poeta nigdy nie wygrywa. Historia slamu w Polsce 2003–2012* [The best poet never wins. The history of slam in Poland 2003–2012], edited by Agata Kołodziej (Internet/Kraków: Hub Wydawniczy Rozdzielczość Chleba, 2013), 122.

²⁹Pisarski.

³⁰Lewandowska claims that her poem originated from her personal experience. Likewise, the VR images are its reminiscences (e.g. the cloth is an attempt at transferring playing with a blanket/bed sheet to VR).

body is not a type of an interface for operating the text (this is how the role of the reader's gesture can be simply characterized in "clickable" texts – hence my wish to deepen the theory of interactive metalepsis by Alice Bell and Astrid Ensslin³¹), but rather, just as in everyday life, simply a body in touch with reality (in this case – also virtual). It does not mediate the experience – it participates in it. And although the virtual reality is (technologically) simulated, VR *Nightsss* does not offer a simulation of an experience – it makes the act of experiencing its axis³². And this is different for every immersant, which is typical for interactive art, which is closer to events than artifacts. The direction of gaze, gestures or steps, the sequence of interactions all determine the course and quality of experiencing VR *Nightsss*. Nonetheless, the lyrics of Lewandowska's poem remain the "narrative axis" of the experience, and certain elements or scenes will always occur. The relationships between words and what is visible, audible, or perceived will be unchangeable as well.

A luminous figure invites us to the world of *Nightsss*, to an interaction and physical exploration. The trusting hand reaching out to us is irresistible, however, it depends on the immersant whether and how far they are willing to follow the invitation. The androgynous figure breaks into particles of light, scattered across the world of *Nightsss*. It becomes disembodied, giving the voice to the poet (and at this very moment the audio landscape is filled with the lyrics of the poem – Lewandowska's voice) and making space for a new body – that of the immersant. The invitation initiating the experience is an act of handing it over to the immersant, who (as the experiencing subject) in a way replaces the lyrical subject. Virtual reality, contrary to the virtual literary world, allows to "hack" the mind – as the directors argued following Sundance Film Festival. As a result, the immersant starts to form their own memories from the experience, they are no longer a passive recipient of someone else's memories. This is why the "replacement" of bodies is so significant. Lewandowska decides to not only hand over her experience to the immersant (their body); she also agrees not to have full control over them.

As I was working on the screenplay for *Nightsss*, she explained, I was thinking that I would like the experiencing person to actually write my poem by themselves, I would like for them to feel that this is their experience while immersing in that VR, and that they are writing from it. I interpreted the space of my experience in such a way as to make *Nightsss* happen, and now someone immerses in all those things and gets their own potential version of this text out of it. They find themselves in that process and those emotions where I once was³³.

Thereby the physically immersed recipient is given agency, which is perfectly illustrated by a memory of experiencing *Nightsss* by Ewa Drygalska, who summarized this VR as "technolog-

³¹Alice Bell, Astrid Ensslin, *Digital Fiction and the Unnatural. Transmedial Narrative Theory, Method, and Analysis* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2021).

³²This could not be said about *Water Cave*, whose reception is – from the perspective of corporality – somewhat schizoid: we are sitting motionlessly while moving (the experience of traveling is only a simulation).

³³Agnieszka Przybyszewska, Weronika Lewandowska, "Kiedy czytelnice ciało błądzi po dźwiękowo-wizualnym krajobrazie. O (nie)możliwym romansie poezji i rzeczywistości wirtualnej z Weroniką Lewandowską rozmawia Agnieszka Przybyszewska" [When the reader's body wanders through an audio-visual landscape], *Techsty* 12 (2022), https://techsty.art.pl/m12/noccc_rozmowa.html. A slightly shortened version of the interview translated into English by Agata Sadza has been published at The Writing Platform (Can you experience a lyrical situation and a poem with your own body?, The Writing Platform, 27.04.2022, <https://thewritingplatform.com/contributor/weronika-m-lewandowska/>)

ically-mediated exercises in sensuality and closeness”. She described: “The reality around me whirls to the rhythm of subsequent onomatopoeic stanzas. Leaves are rustling more and more intensely, the wind-blown cloth seems to be real in the sky. Dusk is cut through with light, I raise my hands and create flashes of gleaming light with my movements”.

This happens because the designed structure of the experience leaves space for the reader’s body, an empty space for filling³⁴ – which is why it was so important for the directors to visualize the recipient’s hands, to show them that they are incorporated into the tissue of that world. Hence I cannot agree with Pisarski, who refers to the immersant’s body as “dematerialized”³⁵. VR *Nightsss* uses the immersant’s body, impacting it (and the mind), which is why VnLab consistently advertised the experience as “an animation with ASMR elements” (as Frydrysiak stressed in interviews, the whole body as well as its movement can be used in constructing them). Although Lewandowska debunks the myth that VR *Nightsss* was designed or was meant to be such an experience³⁶, she discusses its ASMR character and stresses its multidimensionality: it comprises sounds, the sound and timbre of the voice, haptic sensations related to the trembling of controllers preceding the (planned or unplanned) interaction. This is completed with visual stimuli.

VR *Nightsss* is an erotic poem³⁷, an attempt at showing (or embodying) an ecstatic, sexual moment and the bliss Lewandowska experienced, which inspired her to write the poem (Drygalska described it as a “special type of dirty talk based on onomatopoeic poetry”³⁸). Alleviation, calmness, a sense of security which is experienced both when entering and leaving VR *Nightsss* was highlighted both in Drygalska’s and Pisarski’s reviews³⁹. The dynamics of experiencing dictated by the axis of the poetic text is not much different from that proposed for *Wieczór Formy Poetyckiej* – the final scene of breaking dawn realizes the same scheme of replacing, obscuring one quality with another, intensifying it with perfect visualizations and a (decisively more immersive than the dynamic typography) soundtrack. This means that during that time the tension is growing.

Highly specific images and sounds are used to dynamize this in VR. As Lewandowska commented: “The erotic and affective quality of the poem permeates [...] elements of the virtual space. Nature ripples, glimmers, melts in hands, spilling through us and space. It awakens the

³⁴I have found the sylleptic protagonist – one that simultaneously functions in the world of fiction and their own, and for whom there is space left in the novel’s structure – a helpful category in discussing narrative experiences (not just VR) (Przybyszewska 2023).

³⁵Pisarski.

³⁶Przybyszewska, Lewandowska.

³⁷One headline from „Gazeta Wyborcza” mentioned a Polish erotic (!) VR film debuting at a prestigious festival. In the main text of this article, Anna Tatarska refers to it as “an animated erotic poem”. See Anna Tatarska, “Debiutantki z Polski pokonały 14 tys. konkurentów. Ich erotyczny film VR ma premierę na prestiżowym festiwalu” [Polish debutants beat 14,000 competitors. Their erotic VR film premieres at a prestigious festival], *Gazeta Wyborcza* (29.01.2021), <https://wyborcza.pl/7,101707,26736058,debiutantki-z-polski-pokonaly-14-tys-konkurentow-ich-erotyczny.html>.

³⁸Ewa Drygalska, “Czuła jest noc” [Tender is the night], *Dwutygodnik.com* 315 (2021), <https://www.dwutygodnik.com/artykul/9668-czula-jest-noc.html>.

³⁹For Lewandowska it was also important to create the right atmosphere for reception and make the immersant calm even before they put on the headset. Hence the installation accompanying the experience and providing recipients with artists’ instructions (however, not always – due to organizational and financial issues). This is known as onboarding: the moment of transition, a delicate and fluid introduction to the experience. Its role is the subject of more and more discussions, which can be seen in the latest XR productions.

body and the memory of intimate experiences”⁴⁰. First of all, we once again encounter the luminous figure; we can give in to the suggestion of its movements, join it in a whirl of an ecstatic dance⁴¹, but we do not have to. Regardless of the immersant’s attitude (passive or active), at one point the figure will run through them. Even if by that moment the passive attitude did not allow for experiencing the lyrical situation intensely – at that moment it is impossible not to feel the two bodies joined together. The light blue cloth (in the poem – a “blanket”) plays a similar role of an androgynous avatar in the structure of the experience. By waving above the recipient’s head, it actually invites them to an intensive physical penetration of the landscape, to looking at different directions, to a change of perspective. Simultaneously, also the mantric and ecstatic spoken-word recitation depends on engaging in a physical interaction: the immersant’s hand gestures can multiply the audio layer, cause subsequent, looped and repetitive layers reflecting a blissful moment of distraction. All this could be described as ASMR, however, in fact it is a sophisticated network of stimuli in which the immersant immerses step by step.

In summary, Lewandowska handed over her memory and experience to the recipient. It would be an oversimplification to say that they are supposed to enter her role and feel what she felt. They can experience it differently. Just as VR allows to enter the world of images, it can also enter the represented world of a poem and experience it first-hand (with one’s own body and senses). And when we become the subject of a lyrical situation, the lyrical subject becomes redundant.

(Literary) hapticity extended after all?

Compared to VR *Nightsss*, the examples cited in the first part of this paper seem rather reserved. Even though it offers a journey, *Water Cave* is made for experiencing it while sitting down (it uses the so-called first-person point of view (POV) poetics, characteristic for video games). As a result, despite the fact it was made using technology allowing full physical immersion, the movement is almost completely disembodied (except for head and eye movements). Swimming (experience frequently explored in VR!), emerging, falling all remain acts of imagination, reinforced by visual stimuli from the headset. The recipient of *Monoliths* is even more immobilized – they contemplate static images of places presented in the poems almost idly (a bit of interaction at the end of each fragment is symbolic, neither does it take advantage of gestures as exploration tools in VR). *Canticle* is an even more extreme example, as in fact it is watched rather than experienced (due to its structure and the used technology).

When I look for comparisons for VR *Nightsss*, the first one that comes to my mind is the critically acclaimed *Eurydice, a Descent into Infinity* by Celine Daemen, dubbed a VR opera. What they have in common is first and foremost the way in which words (in Daemen’s work – lyrics of a poetic libretto by Charlotte Van den Broeck) harmonize with the designed interaction. *Eurydice...* invites the recipient to slowly descend into the pits of hell – the whole experience

⁴⁰Monika Redzisz, “VR: wiele zależy od naszej ekspresji. Tyle możesz doświadczyć, na ile odważysz się działać ciałem” [VR: a lot depends on our expression. The more you dare to do with your body, the more you can experience], *Wysokie Obcasy* (23.03.2021), <https://www.wysokieobcasy.pl/wysokie-obcasy/7,157211,26894624,vr-wiele-zalezy-od-naszej-ekspresji-tyle-mozesz-doswiadczyć.html>.

⁴¹The choreography was devised (under motion captures) by Kaya Kołodziejczyk.

opens with a scene in which Eurydice's soul detaches from her body and sets off on a journey. We can follow her, immersing ourselves in a maze of steep, winding paths of an incredible visual structure created by Aron Fels (the fact that it was awarded for the best design at ART*VR Festival in Prague in 2023 is unsurprising). The black-and-white space seems to be falling apart, thus reflecting the moment of transition in a fascinating way. As argued by Fels, it is also a type of unfinished space – impossible to experience in reality, but achievable in VR.

The fact that the user is travelling, truly moving all the time (walking, taking turns, moving), following a disembodied soul deeper and deeper, sometimes losing it, seems to be the most important (and the most interesting) element of the experience. And although in reality they walk in circles in a small space, they have an impression that they are following Eurydice through endless corridors and tunnels. There are small stones lying on the (actual) floor we are walking on, making each step uncertain. The haptic dimension of the experience intensifies immersion, perfectly complementing the visual stimuli (black-and-white, semi-transparent outline of the maze structure, as if it was only appearing or falling apart). As a result, it is as if the immersant was meditating in motion. This effect is further intensified by the assumed time of the interaction (25 minutes) and the multilevel audio landscape⁴². Music and song lyrics intertwine with the sound and splashes of water, not always perceptible, but perfectly aligned with the immersant's body movements.

Van den Broeck, author of the libretto, stressed that she always missed Eurydice's voice in artistic rewritings of the myth – hence Eurydice is the lyrical subject of the text (Van den Broeck also stressed that the poetic form perfectly harmonizes with the world in which the recipient immerses). Over the course of the experience – just as is the case with VR *Nightsss* – bodies are replaced: thanks to engaging the whole body in the reception process, also the immersant becomes the one who experiences travelling in an in-between space (on a different, metatextual level – also between reality and virtual reality); Eurydice's agency becomes their agency. Although they do not enter her body, by following her they can experience what she experienced deeper and deeper, and thereby – what the lyrical “I” of the chant accompanying the experience is talking about⁴³. Unlike e.g. *Monoliths*, in this VR experience the landscape and interaction are not only an illustration, a sounded image of a lyrical situation, they do not merely allow to go there a little bit more literally than in one's imagination – they create a space for being the subject of events, for literally experiencing. At the same time, they do not impose the need to enter someone else's skin.

The director of *Eurydice*... also stressed that this was the type of experience (and transgression) she wanted to offer her audience. In promotional video materials for the Venice Film Festival (2022), she said: “I hope the audience experiences the kind of contrast within themselves of on the one hand, them wanting to go deeper and deeper into this infinite space, like a luring void you stare into and that draws you in, and at the same time, that you kind of resist to this feeling, to this desire and think: «oh, this might not be a human place to be, I might not feel at home in this space of wandering and disembodied souls»”⁴⁴.

⁴²Sounded by Kate Moore and Wouter Snoei.

⁴³The artists also reprinted the lyrics of the libretto in the program for the experience, so that immersants could refer to the text.

⁴⁴See <https://www.youtube.com/embed/cn56ix7xKEc>.

Smolińska concludes her considerations regarding extended hapticity with an analysis of virtual experiences depriving of the truth of touch and empathy: “[e]ven though in its Latin-derived name digital art contains a finger, it still does not fully realize its tactile sensitivity and potential. Surely haptic effects can be convincingly conveyed through the new media, including touch screens or interactive immersive installations – however, I would go as far as to say provocatively that it is seduction without the satisfying fulfillment, often even in the haptic imagination”⁴⁵. In reference to many e-literary works which rely on the poetics of digital gestures (as well as, more broadly, any such works of art) this constation will be legitimate, and its accuracy is connected with the issues of interactive metalepsis as conceptualized by Bell and Ensslin, in which users’ gestures remain only symbolically connected with the world of a story. In the case of works using the category of a sylleptic protagonist (“you”), often involving immersing the full body in the virtual reality, this will not be the case. In VR *Nightsss* the whole architecture of the experience, including what was described as animation with ASMR elements for publicity purposes, is based on exploring the possibilities of arousing physical sensations, extending hapticity offered by the “real” reality. This fraud – as the technology’s ability to trick, hack our minds is the most semantically meaningful quality of VR – creates a plethora of possibilities for digital stories and is increasingly more explored. This is evidenced by works such as *Forager* (pr to be exhibited in a specifically designed space, in which the experience is enriched with olfactive sensations and generated gusts of wind), described by its creators as “a multisensory VR experience” or “an immersive mycological experience”, as well as the direction in which VR research (and its hapticity) is developing. Examples include Polish ones, like Hapling, a haptic ring developed by Haptology, a Polish start-up from Cracow. Judging by the most important festivals featuring VR, more and more often it is not just the VR projection, but also the space created for its reception that is becoming an element of the artistic message, a significant ingredient of the whole experience (e.g. *Eurydice*). In the case of Lewandowska and Frydrysiak’s work, it should be stressed that it was pioneering and innovative also in terms of space (many presentations were complimented by special installations, which was strongly requested by Lewandowska). It was VR *Nightsss* that inspired future installations by VnLab, significantly changing the team’s initial philosophy in terms of how their projects are presented. At the same time, based on qualities derived directly from literature and literary performance (the sound of language, priocepticity), VR *Nightsss* offers an experience which fills the gap discussed by Smolińska⁴⁶.

Towards an inclusive discourse in place of appropriation

The (neo)avant-garde entanglement of the reader’s body, movement, and various dimensions of poetry with which we experience VR *Nightsss* has become a pretext for discussing the need to include several themes in discussions not only about VR as a medium/technology, but also literature. My goal has been to draw attention to the glaring lack of the literary-studies perspective and thinking about readers in discussions about the possible applications of VR in

⁴⁵Smolińska, 354.

⁴⁶Of course, not necessarily on the level of touch – the shaking of controllers accompanying interactions in the world of the poem has only a simulacral dimension.

art. Hence identifying potential areas of “love affairs” of the art of words with the new medium, whose aim was to highlight that we should not forget about those new, often convoluted relationships, also when discussing history of literature (especially of the electronic one).

“Unfortunately, Łódź Film School – at least for now – wants this important, acclaimed work to be perceived as a film perhaps too much” – Pisarski complained following the London premiere of *VR Nightsss*⁴⁷. Lewandowska and Frydrysiak’s work is an artistic VR exploring what the medium has to offer, and at the same time – a literary work which bravely explores and tests how this new technology can refresh the poetic performance, allow to say more, be finally (?) contained in language (even bearing in mind skepticism for “VR literature” as a category presented in this paper). “It is also poetry, a performance, a type of electronic literature. First and foremost, it represents its own genre, with its own history and a rich constellation of similar works which belong to literary or literary-inspired VR experiences” – argued Pisarski.

When *VR Nightsss* premiered in Poland – at the New Horizons film (!) festival – it was characterized as “a virtual erotic poem”, “a highly sensual and embodied experience of poetry”, immediately adding: “Which is why it is a perfect illustration of this year’s main theme – the two artists invite us to enter the cinema «anew», to return to film also beyond our bodies”. Was that necessary? Soon after its worldwide premiere, in the episode of the podcast *Voices of VR*, titled “*Nightsss*: From Erotic Poem to Immersive Poetry to Neuroscience Research” Kent Bye stressed the literary (poetic) nature of *Nightsss* rather than its cinematic character⁴⁸. He clearly situated the text against the background of visual poetry (similarly to the famous XR MUST digital experience database). Therefore, it would seem that discussions beyond VnLab are able to notice the literary contexts of *VR Nightsss*, aptly adding the theme missing from considerations about VR. *VR Nightsss* was realized in a medium which is still learning – or discovering – its poetry, assisted by numerous love affairs (not only with literature). *VR Nightsss* should not be exclusively appropriated by either film studies or literary studies. Nonetheless, surely it has more in common with literature than film.

translated by Paulina Zagórska

⁴⁷Pisarski.

⁴⁸Kent Bye, “«Nightsss»: From Erotic Poem to Immersive Poetry to Neuroscience Research”, *Voices of VR* (18.02.2021), <https://voicesofvr.com/979-nightsss-from-erotic-poem-to-immersive-poetry-to-neuroscience-research/>.

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KEYWORDS

VR LITERATURE

VR poetry

ABSTRACT:

The paper discusses the possible applications of virtual reality in literature. The first part characterizes possible “love affairs” between VR and literature, as well as some critical considerations regarding “VR literature”. The second part analyzes in detail VR *Nightsss* by Weronika Lewandowska and Sandra Frydrysiak, considering previous media realization of the poem *Nightsss*, i.e. the narrative axis of that experience. The analysis is based on the concept of an embodied act of reading and describing a poetic VR experience as one in which the recipient becomes the subject (experiencing) a lyrical situation.

N i g h t s s s

embodied reading

**Weronika
Lewandowska**

NOTE ON THE AUTHOR:

Agnieszka Przybyszewska (1982) – PhD, assistant professor, Department of Literary Theory, Institute of Contemporary Culture, University of Łódź. Her research interests include latest literary forms, especially their media diversity – electronic literature and liberature. Fascinated by XR and its possible applications in storytelling. Author of *Liberackość dzieła literackiego* [Liberariness of a literary work] and over 50 academic papers, as well as chapters in edited volumes (among others in “Teksty Drugie”, “Przegląd Kulturoznawczy”). Principal investigator in Polish and international research projects investigating XR and embodied acts of reading.

“An exemplary stenographer at a cotton and cotton textiles export house:” Written threads in Alicja Stern’s prose

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The literary life of “an exemplary stenographer at a cotton and cotton textiles export house”¹ began one morning in 1931 in a dense black stitch of newspaper print in a weekly magazine. She was typing. The clacking of the typewriter keys set the rhythm:

This is the beginning of existence. Andrea escapes from the dark bottomless barrel of dreams, returns from outlandish spaces, and walks through the dull halls of a cotton and cotton textiles export house.

The complex human mechanism approaches the complex mechanism of the Underwood typewriter and the pale keys of her hands set the metal fingers of the Underwood typewriter in motion.

Day in day and day out, from eight in the morning to four in the afternoon, a solemn litany about exporting cotton is recited, and her fingers repeat the hoarse words with maniacal ferocity. Around four o’clock, the white balls on the ceiling fill with light. At four o’clock, the metal fingers of a thousand machines stop moving and thousands of bloodless human hands helplessly let go. “Thank you, that’s it for today, Miss Andrea!” a hoarse voice says.²

¹ Alicja Stern, “Ciała się oddalają” [Bodies are moving away], *Ewa* 19 (1931): 4.

² Alicja Stern, “Ciała się oddalają”, *Ewa* 19 (1931): 4. This and other fragments translated by Małgorzata Olsza.

It all starts with a text, a fabric, and a typewriter. We are at a cotton export house, the story is about cotton products, and the unusual opening is undoubtedly meta-literary. It points to creation – to the fact that the text is metaphorically woven – and to the act of writing. Although fabrics and texts come into contact, the stenographer is not a weaver. Andrea is not Arachne.³ The typewriter is not a loom. The “litany about exporting cotton” is not *écriture féminine*. And the machine-like movements of Andrea’s fingers while typing are not the gestures of a weaver who spins the world into existence. We may read weaving as a metaphor of *écriture féminine*, but this metaphor is dismissed here in and through the economic critique of typewriting. After all, Andrea is not a writer but a stenographer. She is a typewriter – controlled by a relation of subordination. She is just a small cog in the office machine. Her role is to type without adding a single word of her own, to recite the lines of the daily litany, to weave textual matter according to a pattern that is not her own, and not to interrupt the dictate of dictation. Instead of the futurist *Hymn do maszyny mego ciała* [Hymn to the Machine of My Body],⁴ a solemn “litany about exporting cotton” is being typed on a typewriter by a typewriter. The stenographer’s body is like a machine: the “keys of her hands” touch “the metal fingers of the Underwood typewriter.” In this exquisitely constructed *hypallage*, which twice links the modifier to an item other than the one it modifies semantically, connections multiply: the body of the machine is linked to the machine of the body and the typewriter, as a machine, is linked to the machine of language. Moreover, this stylistic trick may be further read as a by-product of a “mental shortcut,” of stenotypical efficiency, the principle of which is to make something as narrow as possible, as suggested by the prefix *stenos*. In this narrow space of alienation, we meet the protagonist of Alicja Stern’s story, Andrea. She is an “exemplary stenographer” who is not allowed to spin her own story. For now! It quickly turns out that – although we are dealing with cotton textiles – the goal is not only to weave but also to unravel.

A for ALICJA

It could seem that the strongest, or perhaps the only, bond connecting Alicja Stern with the avant-garde is the bond of marriage. Known as “the futurist’s wife”⁵ and then simply as “the wife of the poet Anatol Stern,” her own thread in the history of the avant-garde and in the history of literature has not yet been studied attentively. It can be said that all the threads of relatively short stories about Alicja always come together to form the same marital and literary ball. It is not easy to untangle it. However, in 1931, Alicja Stern published a text that was in many respects extraordinary. It was undoubtedly woven of avant-garde threads, which, however, were combined in a disturbing and peculiar way. They were combined even though the title read *Ciała się oddalają* [Bodies are moving away].⁶

³ In my use of weaving and arachnological metaphors I refer to Nancy K. Miller. Nancy K. Miller, “Arachnologies: The Woman, the Text, and the Critic”, in: Nancy K. Miller, *Subject to Change: Reading Feminist Writing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 77-101.

⁴ Tytus Czyżewski, “Hymn do maszyny mego ciała” [Hymn to the Machine of My Body] [1920], in: Tytus Czyżewski, *Wiersze i utwory teatralne* [Poems and plays], ed. Janusz Kryszak, Andrzej K. Waśkiewicz (Gdańsk: Słowo/Obraz Terytoria, 2009), 99.

⁵ Jerzy Korczak, “Żona futurysty” [The futurist’s wife], *Przekrój* 10 (1999): 30.

⁶ Alicja Stern, “Ciała się oddalają”, *Ewa* 18–23 (1931): 4.

The short novel - approximately 40 pages long - was published in six parts in the six consecutive issues of the weekly *Ewa* [Eve] between May 10 and June 14, 1931, in the column "Powieść EWY" [EVE'S novel]. The whole is divided into 17 short chapters with their respective titles. Halfway through, they are no longer numbered. In the biographical notes and questionnaires found in her archive, Alicja Stern always calls *Ciała się oddalają* a novel,⁷ despite it being relatively short. In a biographical dictionary entry dedicated to Alicja Stern, Andrzej K. Waśkiewicz calls *Ciała się oddalają* a romance novel,⁸ and Agnieszka Nęcka calls it a novella.⁹

I came across Alicja Stern's prose while searching for female responses to the voices of the male avant-garde. They are quite difficult to find in the history of Polish literature. In the Archive of Anatol and Alicja Stern, I found many of Alicja's prose texts and drafts, although she was primarily a translator and a co-author of film scripts. She was fascinated with the avant-garde – with the energy of literary experiments and the power of artistic provocations – and with emancipatory ideas. I study her extraordinary talent for building narratives and increasingly regret that her writing was so marginalized in her life. Although in 1931, when she published *Ciała się oddalają* at the age of twenty-six, things could have turned out differently.

This short novel was accounted for in archival materials and bibliographies and, as a press publication, it was quite easy to find. This notwithstanding, it has been almost completely forgotten until recently. It is not part of the history of the Polish avant-garde; Anatol Stern did not mention it in his numerous memoirs; and it does not appear in any of the monographies devoted to the history of Polish women's prose in the interwar period that I know of. *Ciała się oddalają* has been saved from oblivion by Agnieszka Nęcka a few years ago. Nęcka analyzed the text primarily from the perspective of futurist ideas and poetics, paying particular attention to the body, the central theme of sexual initiation, and the powerful erotic tropes. For Nęcka, *Ciała się oddalają* was an expression of Alicja Stern's futurist affiliations and sympathies – it expressed her "disagreement with the existing order" and "challenged social norms and bourgeois morality."¹⁰

Undoubtedly, Alicja Stern's text was created in the field of influence of the Polish futurist avant-garde which was completely devoid of female voices. Alicja Stern was affiliated with the movement as the "futurist's wife:" she regularly collaborated with her husband, the futurist poet Anatol Stern, took part in meetings, worked as a translator, and, in general, lived and breathed futurist slogans. She was part of (in some respect still very current) discussions taking place in the field of the Polish avant-garde. However, in her short novel, Alicja Stern does not, in my opinion, speak from either futurist or avant-garde positions. She is not a "midwife

⁷ Dokumenty osobiste Alicji Sternowej [Personal documents of Alicja Stern], The National Library of Poland, The Archive of Anatol and Alicja Stern, rps akc. 14364.

⁸ Andrzej K. Waśkiewicz, "Alicja Stern" [Alicja Stern], in: *Polski Słownik Biograficzny* [Polish Biographical Dictionary], vol. 43, ed. Andrzej Romanowski (Warsaw–Kraków: Instytut Historii PAN, 2004), 454–455.

⁹ Agnieszka Nęcka, "Obłąd elektrycznej wiosny. O *Ciała się oddalają* Alicji Stern" [The madness of the electric spring: Alicja Stern's *Ciała się oddalają*], in: *Dwudziestolecie międzywojenne. Nowe spojrzenia* [The interwar period: New perspectives], ed. Janusz Pasterski (Rzeszów: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Rzeszowskiego, 2019), 88.

¹⁰Nęcka, 88–99.

to the avant-garde."¹¹ As a woman, she does not want to "modestly contribute to the Polish literary groups which defined the interwar period"¹² nor does she want to play the role of "the Poet's wife who does not allow herself to write."¹³

By publishing her novel in installments, Alicja Stern finds her place – unfortunately only for a short time – among women writers of the Polish interwar period. They are united by, as Agata Araszkievicz writes, "a strong emancipatory awareness, that is a new and different understanding of female subjectivity; respectively they consciously focus on emancipatory topics and employ relevant innovative stylistic strategies."¹⁴ Indeed, *Ciała się oddalają* was written when women's writing was fiercely debated¹⁵ – the text seems to resonate with those discussions – and the role played by the weekly *Ewa* is also not without significance.

E for EWA

Alicja Stern's novel was published in the feminist Jewish weekly *Ewa*. Founded by Paulina Apenszlak and Iza Wagmanowa, the magazine operated in Warsaw from 1928 to 1933. It had a radically emancipatory character – the editors announced in the first issue that the magazine would reflect "the opinions, thoughts, problems and aspirations of the modern Jewish woman fighting for absolute liberation"¹⁶ – and also promoted Zionism. Monika Szablowska-Zaremba writes that the editors wanted *Ewa* to "fight for the rights of women who are aware of all aspects of biological, social, cultural and political life,"¹⁷ awaken women's energy, and support women's emancipation movement. Indeed, the fight for equal rights was fundamentally intersectional – the feminist editors and writers of *Ewa* fought for Jewish women who were even more excluded and discriminated against. Importantly, in addition to the images of the "liberated woman," in *Ewa* feminist ideas were closely linked to an inclusive vision of

¹¹Iwona Boruszkowska uses this metaphor to describe "the contribution of women artists and writers to the formation of the Polish avant-garde movement," which "was and often still is overlooked" or erased. Boruszkowska writes about "critics and propagators of the new art," translators and performers. Iwona Boruszkowska, "Akuszerki awangardy. Kobiety a początki nowej sztuki" [Midwives to the avant-garde. Women and the beginnings of new art], *Pamiętnik Literacki* 3 (2019): 5–14. See also: Iwona Boruszkowska, Michalina Kmiecik, *Style zachowań awangardowych: przypadek polski* [Styles of avant-garde behavior: The case of Poland] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Universitas, 2022) 50–77.

¹²Ewa Graczyk, Monika Graban-Pomirska, "Wstęp" [Introduction], in: *Dwudziestolecie mniej znane. O kobietach piszących w latach 1918–1939* [The forgotten interwar period: Women writers from 1918 to 1939], ed. Ewa Graczyk et al. (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Libron, 2011), 9.

¹³Graczyk, Graban-Pomirska, 9.

¹⁴Agata Araszkievicz, *Zapomniana rewolucja. Rozkwit kobiecego pisania w dwudziestoleciu międzywojennym* [The forgotten revolution: The rise of women's writing in the interwar period] (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo IBL PAN, 2014), 9.

¹⁵These discussions are reconstructed in detail, among others, by Ewa Kraskowska and Agata Zawiszewska. Agata Zawiszewska, *Między Młoda Polska, Skamandrem i Awangardą. Kobiety piszące wiersze w dwudziestoleciu międzywojennym* [Young Poland, Skamander, and the Avant-garde: Women who wrote poems in the interwar period] (Szczecin: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Szczecińskiego, 2014), 66–88; Ewa Kraskowska, *Piórem niewieścim. Z problemów prozy kobiecej dwudziestolecia międzywojennego* [With a woman's pen: Women's prose in the interwar period] (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu im. Adama Mickiewicza, 1999), 13–37.

¹⁶"Od redakcji" [The editorial], *Ewa. Pismo Tygodniowe* 1 (1928): 1.

¹⁷Monika Szablowska-Zaremba, "Koncepcja «kobiety uświadomionej» na łamach tygodnika «Ewa» (1928–1933)" [The concept of "the liberated woman" in the weekly *Ewa* (1928–1933)], in: *Księgowanie. Literatura, kobiety, pieniądze* [Bookkeeping: Literature, women, money], ed. Inga Iwasiów, Agata Zawiszewska (Szczecin: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Szczecińskiego, 2014), 290.

technological progress, a positive vision of modernity, and mechanization. Exclusion and inequalities caused by them were criticized.

Szabłowska-Zaremba mentions Alicja Stern among the many active collaborators of *Ewa*.¹⁸ We do not know exactly how close this cooperation was and whether it was permanent and related to the editorial work in a broader sense.¹⁹ However, we know that when Alicja Stern published her texts in *Ewa* she manifested her affinity with the community of Jewish women writers and, at the same time, she declared herself a feminist. She places a woman at the center of *Ciała się oddalają*, showing how she functions in a patriarchal world and in subsequent relationships with different men. Alicja Stern seems to criticize the patriarchy and fights it with the help of parody and irony. At the same time, she also challenges male fantasies of modernity. As Andrea, as the new woman, gradually liberates herself from the relationships based on male domination, Alicja Stern also makes it clear that she, too, believes in *Ewa*'s critique of contemporary economic and social life. Modernity in *Ciała się oddalają* is ambivalent: progress, technology, and the world of machines both fascinate and show their ugly side, not only as dangerous to bodies and subjectivity but above all as tools for perpetuating patriarchal power.

The context of *Ewa* is crucial for interpreting the story. *Ciała się oddalają* should not be taken out of this context and isolated from other critical and feminist voices. Surrounded by a dense network of journalistic intertexts, the novel signifies in connection with the voices of female journalists who fought for equal rights for women. *Ciała się oddalają* undoubtedly resonates with those voices. It can be said that for Alicja Stern *Ciała się oddalają* was from the very beginning engaged in a dispute. Could feminist re-evaluations of the language of the futurist avant-garde made by the wife of one of the most famous and innovative Polish futurists have been published anywhere else?

A for ANDREA

The novel is therefore woven in shorthand – it follows the rules of someone else's deign – and Andrea returns home from work to devote herself to her daily life. In a narrative close-up, we see her surrounded by materials and sounds of the most ordinary household activities: “Home. Gas, drops hitting the porcelain sink [...] an intricate pattern of yellow upholstery and the endless, convoluted story of the drops,”²⁰ a snoring kettle, a faucet, “identical cubes of furnished air in which hectic lives are brewing.”²¹ The focus on materiality effectively distances Alicja Stern's narrative from the “feminine mystique” found in romance novels. Andrea goes about her business, trying, as Jolanta Brach-Czaina puts it, to “find meaning in everyday life.”²² She can listen to “this monotonous, mysterious story” “for hours.”²³ However, she is

¹⁸Szabłowska-Zaremba, “Koncepcja «kobiety uświadomionej» na łamach tygodnika «Ewa» (1928–1933), 292.

¹⁹Alicja Stern also published film reviews in *Ewa* in the “Kino” [Cinema] column as early as in 1928 (issues #3 and #5). It can therefore be assumed that she cooperated with the editorial office in various ways throughout the years.

²⁰Alicja Stern, “Ciała się oddalają”, *Ewa* 19 (1931): 4.

²¹Alicja Stern, “Ciała się oddalają”, *Ewa* 19 (1931): 4.

²²Jolanta Brach-Czaina, *Szczeliny istnienia* [Gaps of existence] (Kraków: eFKa, 1999), 66.

²³Alicja Stern, “Ciała się oddalają”, *Ewa* 19 (1931): 4.

bothered time and time again by an obtrusively recurring memory of her work as a stenographer: the boss "is bending down" over Andrea, tormenting and "crushing" her with his "fat eyes."²⁴ In the faucet's throat, "the story [of everyday life] is silenced by the boss's fat hand."²⁵ Andrea can no longer stop thinking about it and...: "From that moment on, events progressed at a dizzying pace."²⁶ Suddenly, without any narrative warning, Andrea makes her escape – we do not know where she is going but we do know what she is running away from. She escapes the male gaze and finds her own space.

The exemplary stenographer at the cotton and cotton textiles export house spent twenty minutes in front of a mirror, admiring her belly, her thighs, and her breasts – they were smooth and cold, like asphalt, matte, like the white balls which fill with milky light at four in the afternoon – something about it made her anxious, nauseated, and made her hands tremble.

This strange naked woman sneakily entered the mirror and was looking at Andrea with her curious eyes. It was uncanny – Andrea quickly wrapped her scarf around her.²⁷

In this extraordinary scene, Andrea is examining her body in the mirror, only to reclaim it in a non-erotic image and inappropriate language, in which the body can be like asphalt – cold, matte, and nauseating. She suddenly discovers it anew, transcending the perspective of heterosexual desire. She is looking at herself not through the male gaze but through the feminine "curious" eyes of a stranger, a "naked woman," whom she does not know yet. She wraps her scarf around her – not to cover her nakedness but to carefully and tenderly shelter her body. It is probably no coincidence that in the rational narrative suspended between cotton exports and everyday life, the first encounter with the "naked woman" is "uncanny." It challenges the familiar and the known. It questions and deconstructs all established figures and roles. It activates the language of the body and the language of desire. Andrea may thus set off on her journey.

In and through the figure of the "exemplary stenographer,"²⁸ Alicja Stern from the very beginning tries to reflect on the relationship between the female body and writing, one's own and somebody else's language. It exists in-between the gaze and writing, or rather in-between the

²⁴Alicja Stern, "Ciała się oddalają", *Ewa 19* (1931): 4.

²⁵Alicja Stern, "Ciała się oddalają", *Ewa 19* (1931): 4.

²⁶Alicja Stern, "Ciała się oddalają", *Ewa 19* (1931): 4.

²⁷Alicja Stern, "Ciała się oddalają", *Ewa 19* (1931): 4.

²⁸The stenographer is also an important character in the comedy *Pani minister tańczy* [Miss Minister Dances] from 1937. The script was written by Alicja and Anatol Stern. Agnieszka Janiak-Jasińska thus describes the film: "Nice, smiling, and diligent girls who work as stenographers are the norm. They are a perfect background for someone extraordinary, a female minister, in this 'comedy of errors.' The typewriter is shown as a clearly feminine work tool. It demonstrates that only some jobs were generally considered appropriate for women: a type of auxiliary and manual labor that did not violate the hierarchy of gender and power." Agnieszka Janiak-Jasińska, "Maszyna do pisania i jej wpływ na sytuację kobiet na rynku pracy biurowej na ziemiach polskich na początku XX wieku" [The typewriter and its impact on the situation of women in the office labor market in Poland at the beginning of the 20th century], *Rocznik Antropologii Historii 2* (2014): 95-97. The relationship between the mechanization and feminization of office labor remains a very complex and ambivalent issue. Women were, on the one hand, allowed to work and earn their own money and, on the other hand, gender hierarchy was perpetuated. I believe that Alicja Stern problematizes this ambivalence, although she is mostly critical of it. I would like to thank Agnieszka Karpowicz for drawing attention to this context.

power of the male gaze and the dictate of the transcribed words, in-between the gaze that is not one's own and writing that is not one's own. The boss's suppressing gaze – and the boss stands for economic power and sexual violence who is always threatening Andrea – takes away her voice, takes away her language, and takes over the space in which women's writing could emerge. Only escaping the power of someone else's gaze makes it possible to reconstruct the scene of writing, as Nancy K. Miller puts it. When Andrea ceases to be an object, she begins to manifest herself as a speaking subject and, using the language of her desire, she can resist all other languages that suppress it.

And that is indeed what happens! Alicja Stern introduces an excellent micro-concept, a small and seemingly insignificant figure, that disarms the patriarchal order. Writing in shorthand can be an act of subversion! Suddenly, unexpectedly, the “exemplary stenographer” makes a mistake. “A” is missing in the address line of a very important letter regarding “large cotton shipments to the Soviet Union.” Scared, Andrea hides the copy of the letter. Fortunately, the commercial consequences of the mistake will no longer concern us. The letter “A” is finally found but not in language or in the cotton export house. It is found “in the real world,” brightly lit, in the neon of the “Alhambra” nightclub. “Alhambra” stands for night, noise, jazz, dancing, the body, and liberation. It also stands for, as a powerful metaphor announces, “the madness of the electric spring,” which, together with the letter “A” that was lost and later found, is about to begin. This is the moment when Andrea stops being exemplary. She stops working as a stenographer altogether and throws herself into the vortex of nightlife and sexual adventures. She falls in love and leaves her former life, the keys of the Underwood typewriter, the daily “solemn litanies about exporting cotton,” and her boss's gaze behind.

However, it seems that the letter “A” that was lost and later found is not only found in the “Alhambra” neon. It may be found in the name ANDREA. Andrea may also be an androgynous trope. The name is both masculine and feminine, and it may be linked to masculinity (Greek *andros*). Alicja Stern undoubtedly plays with this trope, introducing “Henryk” [Henry] and “Henryka” [Henrietta] as “a male and female entertainer at Alhambra.”²⁹ The oppressive binary opposition between masculinity and femininity is repeatedly highlighted in and through double images and the double language of this questionable romance novel.

R for ROMANCE NOVEL

Jerzy Korczak recalls that Alicja “wrote something, some romance novels under a pseudonym; they were not openly discussed and she never shared them with her friends.”³⁰ If only all “romance novels written under a pseudonym” by Alicja Stern were like *Ciała się oddalają...* Alicja Stern, however, does not write this romance novel under a pseudonym. She signs it with her name and surname. The romance novel seems to be a pseudonym for a different form, and Alicja Stern presents us in this peculiar crypto-romance novel with what I think is a brave feminist parody. Full of critical anti-futurist tropes, it only pretends to be a romance novel.

²⁹Alicja Stern, “Ciała się oddalają”, *Ewa* 19 (1931): 4.

³⁰Korczak, 30.

In this context, *Ciała się oddalają* shows the exhausted myths of modernity, the overpraised slogans of the avant-garde, and the discredited strategies of futurists. The text opposes traditional conservative social and moral norms, but its author does not, I think, decide to ally herself with futurism in this anti-bourgeois rebellion. On the contrary. This is not where she seeks her roots or legitimization for her own voice. However, she begins exactly where Filippo Tommaso Marinetti located the sources of his "contempt for women," namely she begins with the romance novel and its poetics. Feminist women authors would often play with this convention in the next twenty years, initiating genological interceptions.

I identify two most important points of reference in *Ciała się oddalają*, from which Alicja Stern critically distances herself, evoking and negating them at the same time. The first reference point is the tradition of popular literature for women. It manifests itself in the generic convention of the poetical romance. At the same time, this tradition is constantly challenged by and intertwined with subversive anti-romance tropes. Both the image and the language reveal their respective dualities. As such, *Ciała się oddalają* seems to be suspended between two opposing voices. One is the affirmative language of the romance novel, and the other is the critical anti-romance language of parody. This duality is a stylistic choice. Alicja Stern refers to the concept of "split" language from the very beginning to the very end of the story.

Erotic descriptions³¹ may exemplify the above. Hyperbolized sentimental poetics and the exaggerated language of stereotypically feminine literature consciously employed by Alicja Stern appear utterly ridiculous. They ridicule themselves. In the ecstasy of love, "Andrea falls into oblivion [...] – hungry body parts are all that is left; hungry, thirsty lips."³² And a moment later her attention is caught only by a "cynical couch," which takes up almost the entire room of her lover Piotr. After many years, Andrea will remember the couch instead of Piotr's face. What a whirlwind romance: a lover with a couch for a face! This is parody at its best. While the formal features of the romance are employed, the novel also contains elements that are inappropriate, bizarre and exaggerated, or only slightly "out of place." Some of these elements are easily recognizable because they take the form of grotesque exaggerations. Others are more problematic, and they remain almost invisible. They follow the rules of irony and "ironing meanings," as Linda Hutcheon writes, because they are most effective when they "exist in absentia" – "they lose their essence unless they remain only implicit."³³ Likewise, the description of sexual intercourse, which may be classified as a formal reference to the romance novel, is utterly grotesque, eccentric, and monstrous. It is a form of play with the grotesque floral ornament: "It started the way it usually starts. The monstrous black orchid of his pants opened."³⁴ Then, in an even wider "ornamental" spectrum, strange plant-animal-human figures are introduced. The entire grotesque scene challenges the rules of the romance novel. Stylistically heterogeneous, woven from different languages, caricatural, and crude, it becomes more and more comic:

³¹Cf. Nęcka, 93. Agnieszka Nęcka writes about the "eroticization" of the represented world and language, the "abundance of eroticism," in Alicja Stern's text.

³²Alicja Stern, "Ciała się oddalają", *Ewa* 18 (1931): 4.

³³Linda Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (London: Routledge, 1994), 146.

³⁴Alicja Stern, "Ciała się oddalają", *Ewa* 18 (1931): 4.

Threatening and unreal, like amputated legs, the pants are hanging on the chair.

He was a smooth beast, an evil beast with powerful teeth and muscles – a smart and cunning beast.

The stenographer at the cotton and cotton textiles export house became an animal – a furry she-bear. At the bottom of the lair, the she-bear and her male are making sweet love. Fir trees and autumn leaves smell sweet. The beech trees are rustling. The animals become one. Forever. Bodies are rolling at the bottom of the mossy lair... Beech trees are rustling... Clouds are floating across the sky, birds are chirping, and fir trees are moaning about animal love [...]

– Do you finally understand what a man is, Andrea?

– I know, a man is God.³⁵

The stenographer's erotic adventure is both hilarious and endowed with a critical potential, primarily at the stylistic level, insofar as it grotesquely combines naturalistic, sentimental, erotic, demonic, and religious phrases. Animal imagery is juxtaposed with blatant pathos, and futurist motifs clash with the sentimental hyperbolized language of the romance novel. The grotesque takes on a parodic and comic character.³⁶ Andrea, who is constantly running away and experiencing extreme bodily adventures, is constricted in and through an oppressive language and in and through an oppressive genre. They are both like a tight corset. Still: "The new Andrea is always naked – her dresses are a joke."³⁷ Alicja Stern tries to free the female body from the power of phallic sexuality by using language in an innovative and critical way. She looks for linguistic ways to challenge and de-censor the stereotypical romance plot. The best convention and the best language she finds is the language of parody.

D for DERISION

What Alicja Stern primarily ridicules in and through her parodic transformations is the tradition of women's romance fiction and its language. She also makes fun of the futurist tradition and the language of modernity. As such, *Ciała się oddalają* is quintessentially ironic, and this irony comes across as even more powerful if we take into account the publication context. The language of Alicja Stern's prose is perfectly double, and a gap found at the center of this duality is a place of resistance. However, Alicja Stern does not write in such a way as if she wanted to contrast male history of modernity and the avant-garde with women's tradition or women's writing, but as if she wanted to challenge both. She neither fully embraces the avant-garde, nor retreats into aestheticism. She plays with the very fabric of the languages of modernity,

³⁵Alicja Stern, "Ciała się oddalają", *Ewa* 18 (1931): 4.

³⁶Characterizing the attitude of avant-garde artists towards the grotesque and calling it "a forgotten artistic language, which is, however, widely used," Włodzimierz Bolecki emphasizes grotesque "aesthetic problems of new art" (W. Bolecki, *Od potworów do znaków pustych: z dziejów groteski. Młoda Polska i dwudziestolecie międzywojenne* [From monsters to empty signs: From the history of the grotesque. Young Poland and the interwar period], *Pamiętnik Literacki* 1989, no. 1, p. 108). Alicja Stern's parodic grotesque is as if elevated and enhanced and thus perhaps it is a parody of futurist grotesque parodies.

³⁷Alicja Stern, "Ciała się oddalają", *Ewa* 18 (1931): 4.

deconstructing them, one might say, from the inside. Her novel is not only based on the textile theme, as signaled by Andrea's workplace, filled with the images of the body, clothes, and urban materials, but above all it is a surprising entanglement of the languages of the avant-garde and modernity and their respective stereotypes and fantasies. Alicja Stern processes them critically from a feminist perspective, using parody and pastiche. She also employs the sheer ludic energy of repetition and its ridiculing effects.

It seems that the entire story is filled with intertextual references to futurist poetry and prose as well as to the rhetoric of the most famous futurist manifestos. We can identify many such references in *Ciała się oddalają*, and this accumulation, combined with the pathetic sentimental language of the romance novel, creates a parodic effect. It is further intensified by the fact that futurist fantasies are clearly male fantasies:

The street flew to meet her like a gentle breeze. The engine of a black car roared discreetly and obediently. [...] At a speed of 100 km per hour, the car rushes towards its destination;³⁸

Fast Fords, Durants, Lancias, Rolls-Royces, and Chevrolets pierce the pale crowds with nostalgic screams reminiscent of metal birds in heat;³⁹

Andrea is a machine set in motion. The shiny cranes – her arms – work quickly and steadily. Andrea is trying to escape her destiny. Destiny has powerful biceps;⁴⁰

[...] the city's tin heart is beating in Andrea's chest – a small heart made of cheap tin. How it rustles!⁴¹

Such descriptions – and others as well – clearly show the city is, as German Ritz put it, an "arena of the battle of the sexes," where an avant-garde masculine battle for possession and power takes place.⁴² The futurist fantasy of woman and machine becoming one may also be found in *Ciała się oddalają*, starting with the opening description of Andrea typing. Some "mechanical" fragments seem to echo Bruno Jasiński's *Nogi Izoldy Morgan* [Izolda Morgan's legs], which must have been of particular interest to Alicja Stern because numerous handwritten fragments of the text may be found in her archive (although it is difficult to date them).

The modern city as a masculine creation combined with a futurist dream of power and conquest is critically employed in *Ciała się oddalają*: "Men build concrete cities, concrete bridges, concrete lives, men are too small and too big to understand love."⁴³ Such revaluations are

³⁸Alicja Stern, "Ciała się oddalają", *Ewa* 18 (1931): 4.

³⁹Alicja Stern, "Ciała się oddalają", *Ewa* 19 (1931): 4.

⁴⁰Alicja Stern, "Ciała się oddalają", *Ewa* 20 (1931): 4.

⁴¹Alicja Stern, "Ciała się oddalają", *Ewa* 20 (1931): 4.

⁴²German Ritz, "Nowy świat i dawny wizerunek kobiety. Polska awangarda po roku 1918 a kulturowe aspekty płci" [A new world and the old image of a woman. Polish avant-garde after 1918 and the cultural aspects of gender], in: German Ritz, *Niż w labiryncie pożądania. Gender i płć w literaturze polskiej od romantyzmu do postmodernizmu* [Thread in the maze of desire. Gender and sex in Polish literature from romanticism to postmodernism] (Warsaw: Wiedza Powszechna, 2002), 165.

⁴³Alicja Stern, "Ciała się oddalają", *Ewa* 20 (1931): 4.

further ridiculed. For example, Alicja Stern refers to the stereotypical oppositions between female (as) nature and male (as) civilization, between the primitive and the progressive. Below she seems to parody the language of Marinetti's *The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism*:

The powerful voice of instinct, the one that brought our foremathers from the darkness of the jungle to the electric metropolis, is as powerful today as it was centuries ago, and today, as centuries ago, it guides pale girls born in the city's concrete bed towards their destiny.⁴⁴

And if urban, spring, mechanical, and electric intertexts were not enough, Alicja Stern further draws on futurism and its obsessions: "During his lonely walks around the area, he constantly encounters potbellied cows and potbellied women – deformed bodies."⁴⁵ This scene, I think, is a clear allusion to Anatol Stern's poem *Spacerujące* [Walking women].⁴⁶ Alicja Stern mocks futurist, misogynistic, and primitivist fantasies. With the help of grotesquely exaggerated pathos and intrusive stylistic additions, she renders such fantasies absurd. And what follows is a true meta-literary satire on intertextual oppression and the male futurist tradition: "Letters arrive from the world [...] Andrea does not answer the letters. She is now strong, lonely, and simple like a milkmaid [...] That's what Andrea is thinking, and she doesn't even know how sorry she is for that electric spring, that original fire that consumed her body only to be extinguished."⁴⁷

Ultimately, Andrea's erotic adventures come to an end, and we see "the madness of the electric spring" in a historical perspective. It is overestimated:

The city where she lived is no more [...] Everyone there was mad, those who turned on the lights over the city, those who slowly walked the burning streets, those who waited longingly at the corners.

The madness of the electric spring slowly fades away, dies in her veins – Andrea sobers up after her drunken spell.⁴⁸

As Rosi Braidotti writes, "parody can be politically empowering on the condition of being sustained by a critical consciousness that aims at engendering transformations and changes."⁴⁹ I would call Alicja Stern's prose a feminist parody of the language of modernity and the futurist avant-garde. She appropriates and displaces avant-garde metaphors, parodying both conservative and avant-garde images of women. She also parodies female characters which are constructed around male subjects by male writers. This double intertextuality thus reveals

⁴⁴Alicja Stern, "Ciała się oddalają", *Ewa* 19 (1931): 4.

⁴⁵Alicja Stern, "Ciała się oddalają", *Ewa* 19 (1931): 4.

⁴⁶Anatol Stern, "Spacerujące" [Walking women] [1919], in: Anatol Stern, *Wiersze zebrane* [Collected poems], vol. 1, ed. Andrzej K. Waśkiewicz (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1986), 47. Agnieszka Nęcka also draws attention to this reference, but she does not interpret it in a parodic context but rather as a literary allusion. Nęcka, 92.

⁴⁷Alicja Stern, "Ciała się oddalają", *Ewa* 19 (1931): 4.

⁴⁸Alicja Stern, "Ciała się oddalają", *Ewa* 20 (1931): 4.

⁴⁹Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 7.

a critical feminist intersectional consciousness – Alicja Stern speaks as a Jewish woman. What is perhaps most interesting and important, however, is that she does not address her text to male audiences, nor does she want to show futurists what feminine futurism might look like or how futurist fantasies lend themselves to feminist parody. *Ciała się oddalają* is dedicated to the doubly excluded female community, namely to the readers of Jewish feminist magazines. Alicja Stern demonstrates that the language of the futurist avant-garde was created by men. She also shows, as Monika Świerkosz writes, that this new language might have been a male response "to the on-going emancipation of women."⁵⁰

N for NEW WOMAN

New Andrea is, in many respects, a "New Woman." She is the new feminist ideal, developed at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. The New Woman, as Agata Zawiszewska writes, is "intelligent, sensitive, and aware of her own sexuality [...]. Her ambitions are not limited only to marriage and motherhood, but also include educating herself in accordance with her abilities and interests. She has a good job; she is creative; she is socially and politically active."⁵¹ However, the way in which Alicja Stern uses the figure of the New Woman and female stereotypes is complex. On the one hand, Andrea definitely does not want to marry and have children, thus challenging social expectations. She is aware of her own sexuality, rebels against conventions, and she quits her abusive job overnight. She leaves her previous life behind and follows her own path, choosing to break away from what she felt was oppressive. On the other hand, although she makes decisions about her own sexuality, she still may be read through the lens of romantic clichés, as one entanglement leads to another. However, I believe that Alicja Stern uses this narrative sequence to expose the principles of male domination. She consciously constructs a grotesque and parodic narrative to challenge patriarchal patterns.

The truly New Andrea only appears in the last scene, where she breaks free from her lover's arms, and runs away. She wants to be alone as soon as possible "to take off [...] the hated mask."⁵² Piotr is looking for her in the room, but he cannot find her anywhere anymore – as if she turned into "powder and blush" that she wanted to get rid of. Piotr scoops it all up – these ashes are all that is left of Andrea – and he holds it "in the living urn [...] of his hand."⁵³ And Andrea is now more alive than ever. She is not controlled by the power of his gaze. She is outside the romantic narrative formula, in a place where he can no longer find her. In a sym-

⁵⁰Referring to Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's reading of Virginia Woolf's works, Monika Świerkosz writes: "[...] the basic assumption of both scholars was that the language of modernism was a product of men's resentment of women (in the social and literary sense); in response to the on-going emancipation of women, "men used the concept of the avant-garde, of artistic experiment to secure their literary legacy." Monika Świerkosz, "Historia literatury kobiet – niedokończony projekt" [The history of women's literature – an unfinished project], *Wielość* 2 (2011): 67.

⁵¹Agata Zawiszewska, "Nowa Kobieta – anglosaska figura i polskie figuracje" [The New Woman – An Anglo-Saxon figure and Polish figurations], in: *Nowa Kobieta – figury i figuracje* [The New Woman – figures and figurations], ed. Inga Iwasiów, Aleksandra Krukowska, Agata Zawiszewska (Szczecin: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Szczecińskiego, 2017), 10–11.

⁵²Alicja Stern, "Ciała się oddalają", *Ewa* 23 (1931): 4.

⁵³Alicja Stern, "Ciała się oddalają", *Ewa* 23 (1931): 4.

bolic scene we find her “at the intersection of two noisy streets,”⁵⁴ where she seems to be reborn – she seems to find her new life “in a gray tunnel of the street”⁵⁵ – and “life” is the last word of the text. It is a different city and a different life – liberated from “the madness of the electric spring,” revalued, and ready to be re-constructed. However, we do not find it in Alicja Stern’s works. Unless there are other “romance novels written under pseudonyms” waiting to be discovered.

This notwithstanding, in order to reach the new “intersection of two streets” Andrea must first embark on a journey that begins when one letter goes missing in a minor act of stenotypical subversion. It leads to other “ruptures” of the fabric of the text that grows out of the dictate of dictation. It is probably no coincidence that the “exemplary stenographer” fails to type the first letter of her name only to soon find it in the neon sign. This sign is a promise of a different life, but it also stipulates that Andrea must re-write her name using lost letters or rather letters that were torn from a text that was not her. She must find those letters elsewhere. But it can only happen when she is “away.” She needs distance, as announced in the original title, which refers to movement in one direction: *Ciała się oddalają* [Bodies are moving away]. However, not only bodies are moving away, but also the text itself. As a parody, it must exist in a distance, beside, “para-.” Parody, as Giorgio Agamben writes, “cannot deny being necessarily beside the song (*para-oiden*), and thus it cannot deny its own not taking place.”⁵⁶ Indeed, Alicja Stern’s text and voice are also “moving away.” They exist “beside” and, ultimately, they “cannot deny their own not taking place.” Suspended in the never-ending to-and-fro movement of parody.

We will probably no longer find undiscovered continents of the female avant-garde of the 1920s and the 1930s in the history of Polish literature, but it is not the avant-garde affiliation that is most appealing. The appeal of Alicja Stern’s *Ciała się oddalają* lies elsewhere. In the tightly woven threads that are impossible to untangle. They are formed when women’s writing refuses to weave a male thread. We find them in the ruptures, which perhaps say the most about the character of the weave itself.

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

⁵⁴Alicja Stern, “Ciała się oddalają”, *Ewa* 23 (1931): 4.

⁵⁵Alicja Stern, “Ciała się oddalają”, *Ewa* 23 (1931): 4.

⁵⁶Giorgio Agamben, *Parody*. In: Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations* (New York: Zone Books, 2007), 40.

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KEYWORDS

f u t u r i s m

ALICJA STERN

ABSTRACT:

This article is an attempt to interpret Alicja Stern's novel *Ciała się oddalają* [Bodies Are Moving Away], which was published in 1931 in six installments in the weekly feminist magazine for Jewish women *Ewa* [Eve]. The author of the article attempts to analyze the text as one of the few feminist literary responses to futurist slogans, ideas, and rhetoric in Poland. The parodic frame of the novel is emphasized. The article argues that thanks to parody Alicja Stern could both critique conservative romance formulas from a feminist perspective and ironically re-evaluate avant-garde postulates. References to the New Woman and critical intertextual games with stereotypical notions of female subjectivity and sexuality are also identified and discussed.

feminism

avant-garde

NEW WOMAN

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Hoża in color: At home in the avant-garde

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Black, white, and red

I wish to start by referring to Paweł Susid's *Untitled (colors already used by the artists)*, a work of art from 2005 whose subtitle seems to be almost a joke. Indeed, it allows one to conclude that the color palette limited to the contrasts of black and white complemented by dynamic red has clear connotations. White, black, and red, the so-called poster colors, automatically trigger associations with the constructivist compositions and typographic designs of the first avant-gardists, such as Alexander Rodchenko (to whom Susid attributed, among others, red) and El Lissitzky. The colors in question also make one think about Polish works inspired by Russian constructivism, such as the cover of the sixth issue of the *Zwrotnica* [Switch] magazine from 1923, designed by Władysław Strzemiński, or the ad for the Mechano Advertising Office (1924) and a poster for the

first exhibition of Mechano-faktura designed by Henryk Berlewi (1924).¹ This color palette that was “already used” was used once again, almost a hundred years later, by Paweł Kłudkiewicz in *Hoża. Moja Ulica / My street*.² As a logovisual work of art, it combines text and drawings.

In the printed book, the play of black, white, and red is an even stronger reminder of the avant-garde tradition. “The combination of black, white, and red which was dominant in the innovative art of the time”³ is inevitably associated with interwar *livres d’art*, for example with the works of Mieczysław Szczuka, such as the cover of Brunon Jasioński and Anatol Stern’s poem *Ziemia na Lewo* [Earth to the Left] (1924), the graphic layout of Anatol Stern’s *Europa* [Europa: A Poem] (1929), and the cover thereof designed by Teresa Żarnower.

The references to interwar aesthetics are easily explained by the concept behind Kłudkiewicz’s book, which combines words and images into an organic whole. This experiment is in itself avant-garde;⁴ it refers to logovisual experiments whose creators understood that printed “WORDS have their graphic weight, sound, color, pattern, THEY TAKE UP SPACE. [...] the main values of the book are its format and typesetting [...] that is why a poet should be both a typesetter and a book-binder [...]”⁵ New art, called “poesiography” by Strzemiński, was thus established. It relied on the “[i]ntegral cooperation between text and graphic art” as well as on the contrast between “painting (space) and poetry (time).”⁶ Kłudkiewicz’s idea of both writing and drawing his book is deeply rooted in this tradition. It is part of the avant-garde history of *livre d’art*: “Unlike traditional illustrations, graphic art in avant-garde books did not illustrate but instead gave rise to a parallel aesthetic plane;” “a *livre d’art*, an autonomous work of art, is created as an independent artistic work;” it is intended to “break the division into text (time) and graphic art (space).”⁷

¹ On avant-garde typography and *livre d’art* design, see: among others: Bożena Lewandowska, “U źródeł grafiki funkcjonalnej w Polsce” [The origins of functional graphic art in Poland], in: *Ze studiów nad genezą plastyki nowoczesnej w Polsce* [Studies on the origins of modern art in Poland], ed. Juliusz Starzyński (Wrocław – Warsaw – Kraków: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1966); Piotr Rudziński, “Konstruktywistyczna typografia wobec poezji. Dwa przykłady” [Constructivist typography and poetry. Two examples], *Biuletyn Historii Sztuki* 1 (1984); Piotr Rypson, *Książki i strony. Polska książka awangardowa i artystyczna 1919–1992* [Books and pages. Polish avant-garde and livres d’art 1919–1992] (Warsaw: CSW Zamek Ujazdowski, 2000); Piotr Rypson, *Nie gęsi. Polskie projektowanie graficzne 1919–1949* [Polish graphic design 1919–1949] (Kraków: Karakter, 2011); Janusz Zagrodzki, “Władysław Strzemiński – obrazy słów” [Władysław Strzemiński – images of words], *Sztuka Europy Wschodniej* 2 (2014); *Maszyna do komunikacji. Wokół awangardowej idei Nowej Typografii* [Communication machine. The avant-garde idea of New Typography], ed. Paulina Kurc-Maj, Daniel Muzyczuk (Łódź: Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi, 2015); Barbara Karasińska, “Główne idee polskiej typografii funkcjonalnej lat 20. XX wieku na wybranych przykładach” [Main trends in Polish functional typography of the 1920s: Selected examples], *Toruńskie Studia Bibliologiczne* 2 (2017); Jacek Mrowczyk, Zdeno Kolesár, *Historia projektowania graficznego* [History of graphic design], trans. Joanna Goszczyńska (Kraków: Karakter, 2018); Anna Kałuża, “Szczuka, Strzemiński, Themersonowie i polska poezja XX wieku” [Szczuka, Strzemiński, the Themersons and Polish 20th-century poetry], *Teksty Drugie* 1 (2022).

² Paweł Kłudkiewicz, *Hoża. Moja ulica / My street* (Warsaw: Schulewicz Publisher, 2022). Henceforth, I use the abbreviation “H” and provide page number in brackets.

³ Aleksander Wójtowicz, “«Europę». O edycjach poematu Anatola Sterna” [‘Europes’: The editions of Anatol Stern’s poem], *Teksty Drugie* 6 (2022): 168.

⁴ On avant-garde relations between words and images see: Beata Śniecikowska, *Słowo – obraz – dźwięk. Literatura i sztuka wizualne w koncepcjach polskiej awangardy 1918–1939* [Word – image – sound. Literature and the visual arts in the concepts of the Polish avant-garde 1918–1939] (Kraków: Universitas, 2005).

⁵ Anatol Stern, Aleksander Wat, “Prymitywiści do narodów świata i do Polski” [Primitivists to the nations of the world and to Poland], in: *Antologia polskiego futurizmu i Nowej Sztuki* [Anthology of Polish Futurism and New Art], ed. Zbigniew Jarosiński, Helena Zaworska (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1978), 5–6 (original spelling).

⁶ Władysław Strzemiński, “Wystawa Nowej Sztuki w Wilnie” [Exhibition of New Art in Vilnius], *Zwrotnica* 6 (1923): 193.

⁷ Rypson, *Książki i strony*, 11.

Does it all boil down to the comprehensive logovisual artistic form(at)? Or perhaps the avant-garde clues that Kłudkiewicz gives us in his autobiographical story about a Warsaw street can lead us somewhere else?

New *Europa*?

The opening pages of the book dedicated to Hoża show Europe drawn in an aesthetic style similar to the one used by Szczuka in Stern's *Europa*.⁸ In Kłudkiewicz's drawing, located right next to the title page, white spots emerge from a black background – gradually, we see the outline of Warsaw, then Europe, then the Earth, and finally space emerge before our eyes. The geographical location of Hoża is marked on each outline with a red dot. Importantly, in the avant-garde map of Europe in Stern's poem, Europe is black, the background is white, and "S.O.S." in capital red letters looms over the drawing. A big part of Europe is occupied by Russia, whose vast territory is largely not included in Kłudkiewicz's map. Black in Szczuka's work corresponds to the vision of "the death of Europe" – "its inevitable destruction," as described in Stern's poem: "Ostatecznie Europa ginie, pożarta przez dionizyjskie bachantki, a jej wszelkie bezcenne wartości, wśród nich także jej nowoczesność, zostają zakwestionowane" [Ultimately, Europe perishes, devoured by Dionysian bacchantes, and all its priceless values, including its modernity, are questioned].⁹ The white spots which emerge from the black background in Kłudkiewicz's book are not as ominous. They are associated with a brightly-lit, friendly, recognizable and familiar place. It stands out from the darkness of indifference, and the red dot marking the location of the titular street makes it the center of the world, its beating heart.

These two shifts – changes in geographical context and color – prove that Kłudkiewicz's book, although it certainly refers to avant-garde aesthetics, does not adopt the same ideology. Nobody calls for a revolution. The message is not enhanced by the clarity of graphic forms. The color red does not refer to the utopia of a "brave new world" that drives a wedge into the old decaying one, symbolized by a white circle, as in El Lissitzky's famous propaganda poster *Beat the whites with the red wedge*.¹⁰ However, in the 2021/22 Design of the Year competition of the Polish Association of Applied Graphic Designers, *Hoża. Moja ulica / My street* received an award in the "Social Impact" category, and not, for example, in the "Form" category, which suggests that it was read/viewed through the prism of social activism. And it is with social activism that we usually associate interwar (typo)graphic projects, especially those which use the so-called poster colors, explore extreme contrasts between them (as symptomatic of extreme social tensions), and do not shy away from the powerful revolutionary red.

⁸ Anatol Stern, *Europa* [Europe: A poem] (Warsaw: Księgarnia F. Hoesik 1929).

⁹ Adam Dziadek, "Atopia – stadność i jednostkowość" [Atopy – the group and the individual], in: *Wizerunki wspólnoty. Studia i szkice z literatury i antropologii porównawczej* [Images of the community. Studies and sketches in comparative literature and anthropology], ed. Zbigniew Kadłubek, Tadeusz Sławek (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2008), 174.

¹⁰ See: Artur Kamczycki, "Czerwonym klinem bij białych. Rewolucyjno-mesjanistyczne znaczenia dzieła El Lissitzky'ego" [Beat the whites with the red wedge. Revolutionary-messianic meanings in El Lissitzky's work], *Sztuka i Dokumentacja* 19 (2018).

Kłudkiewicz writes in the introduction that the local and urban everyday life that he talks about and draws in his book is not, by any means, apolitical: “[...] polityka, która i tak jest wszędzie – kupowanie pizzy jest aktem politycznym, kształty budynków i ulic są pochodną polityki” [politics is everywhere anyway – buying a pizza is a political act, the way buildings and streets look depends on politics] (H 10). The same can also be said about the colors: black, white, and red in *livre d’art* refer directly to the leftist involvement of the first visual and literary avant-garde. Black and red, in turn, as Aleksander Wójtowicz argues, are deeply rooted in the artistic imagination of the interwar period. They are associated with the masses, workers, and lower social classes. “The revolt against the inequalities generated by capitalism” is part of “left-wing iconography” which refers “to class divisions and the idea of the revolution.”¹¹ The special status of the color red could be first noticed in Polish futurist poetry: “red dominated (there was more and more red over time).”¹² This was partly inspired by politically engaged Soviet artists. The links between constructivist graphic design and leftist ideas (and the Russian revolution)¹³ were strong in the interwar period. Certain colors and typographic layouts were considered political – and not just formal – choices and left-wing publishing houses began to use them so often that censors would confiscate new publications without reading them.¹⁴

Apart from the three colors which were dominant in modern graphic design in the interwar period, the avant-garde also manifests itself at the level of the story that is being told about Hoża. “Na mojej ulicy przetrwało tylko kilka domów sprzed 1939 roku. Przedwojenne kamienice są w Warszawie na tyle rzadkie, że budzą sentyment” [Only a few pre-1939 houses survived on my street. Pre-war tenement houses are so rare in Warsaw that they arouse sentiment] (H 23), we read in chapter *C. Kilka starych domów* [C. A few old houses]. Their decorative gates and façades are associated with the charm of the pre-war world, in the mythology of which, however, Kłudkiewicz does not believe, calling the pre-1939 world “rzekomo lepszy[m]” [supposedly better] (H 23). Questioning the myth of interwar Warsaw is linked to a black rectangle placed under a short text (in both the Polish and English versions, and in all the chapters). Only white, lit, windows and a part of a building, seen from below, emerge from the dark background, which heightens the impression that the apartments in tenement houses are “wspaniałe, wysokie” [beautiful, with high ceilings] (H 23). Concurrently, the drawing evokes claustrophobia and anxiety: the lines come together to form a triangle at the top. Smoke, a red form on a white background, rises towards it. It may also be associated with clouds seen against a red sky, evoking brightness (of the sky or artificial lighting). Only the two following pages show elegant and ornate tenement houses, in keeping with the myth of pre-1939 Warsaw as “Paris of the East.” Kłudkiewicz is, however, critical of the plans to revitalize Hoża in that vein. He makes it clear in the next chapter *Ć. Kamienica za 50 zł* [Ć. A tenement house for PLN 50]. It is a drawing of a building which has seen better days.

¹¹Aleksander Wójtowicz, “Czarne i czerwone. Masy ludzkie w poezji polskiego futuryzmu” [Black and red. The masses in the poetry of Polish futurism], *Praktyka Teoretyczna* 3 (2019), 42.

¹²Wójtowicz, “Czarne i czerwone”, 41.

¹³For more on Polish constructivism and its connections with Soviet art see: Andrzej Turowski, *Konstruktywizm polski. Próba rekonstrukcji nurtu (1921–1934)* [Polish constructivism. An attempt at reconstructing the trend (1921–1934)] (Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1981).

¹⁴Andrzej Stawar, “Idee i działalność Mieczysława Szczuki” [Mieczysław Szczuka’s ideas and work], in idem: *Szkice literackie* [Literary sketches] (Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1957), 618–625. Specifically, Teresa Żarnower’s projects are discussed.



Fig. 1.
Paweł Kłudkiewicz,
Hoża. Moja ulica /
My street (Warsaw:
Schulewicz Publisher,
2022), 82

The drawings reinforce the duality of the narrative, which on the one hand talks about elegant pre-1939 tenement houses and magnificent apartments, and on the other hand emphasizes that: “[...] właściwie dotyczy to głównie tych położonych od frontu – tymczasem studnie podwórek to przestrzenie zastygłe i ponure [actually, it mainly pertains to those apartments which face the street – the dark courtyards are stagnant and gloomy spaces] (H 23). Indeed, the stuffy, dark, and airless courtyards were criticized by the constructivist and functionalist modernizers of contemporary cities. Strzemiński writes:

The natural tendency of using a plot of land is to build the tallest houses possible around its outer edges, leaving a dark courtyard in the middle. Such a courtyard, closed on all sides and deprived of fresh air, becomes a never-ventilated reservoir of moisture, putrefying bacteria, and polluted air coming from the apartments which surround it. There is no way that apartments overlooking such a courtyard can be ventilated or have access to fresh air. There is also no way sunbeams will reach them, except for a few apartments on the top floors and apartments facing the street, unless they face north.¹⁵

Although such impressive tenement houses are a product of the so-called *belle époque*, its beauty seems relative: “Jeśli miało się kapitał, melonik na głowie i jechało się dorożką do lupanaru, wszystko dookoła mogło się podobać. Gorzej, jeśli było się zużytym ludzkim AGD tamtych lat, na przykład starą służącą” [If you had the money, if you had a bowler hat and rode in a carriage to a park, everything around you was pretty. If you were a worn-out human household appliance of the era, for example an old maid, things looked less optimistic] (H 23). For the latter, the *belle époque* was a time of hard work. They experienced the city from the perspective of basement apartments, almshouses, and cobblestones.

On a two-page spread, a section of *Hoża* closely resembles an elegant Parisian Street, but the text that follows describes ruthless reprivatization and illegal eviction of tenants. Hired goons would forcefully make people move out of their apartments and then tenement houses would be sold for the price of “trz[ech] pacz[ek] papierosów” [three packs of cigarettes] (H 26). On the last page of chapter *Ć. Kamienica za 50 zł*, the history of reprivatization in Warsaw is illustrated by a drawing of a white tenement house whose outline and windows are black (they bring to mind darkness and empty apartments as well as the darkness of what is happening inside). Banners on the building read “SPRAWIEDLIWOŚĆ / DLA JOLI BRZESKIEJ” [JUSTICE / FOR JOLA BRZESKA] who was “ZABITEJ W WALCE / O PRAWO / DO MIESZKANIA / 1 MARCA 2011” [KILLED FIGHTING / FOR THE RIGHT / TO HOUSING / MARCH 1, 2011] (H 28). The first part of the slogan is in red letters and the second part is in black letters. In the center there is a portrait of Jola Brzeska – she was a victim of ruthless reprivatization; after her tragic and still unexplained death, she became a symbol of the tenants’ fight for the right to housing. In Kludkiewicz’s book, black, white, and red still semantically refer to the ideas of the first avant-garde.

Many thematic threads of the story about *Hoża* resonate with them, illustrating the numerous aberrations of capitalism that leave their mark on the city. The walls of old factories are absorbed by apartment buildings (*Ś. Stare fabryki* [*Ś. Old Factories*]): “Może nie od razu pojawią się tu szklane windy, klimatyzacja i aromat syntetycznej wanilii” [Maybe glass elevators, air conditioning, and the aroma of synthetic vanilla will not appear right away] (H 78). Abandoned and dilapidated tenement houses listed in the Municipal Register of Monuments of the Capital City of Warsaw are unlawfully demolished, such as the one with a mural showing a one-zloty coin and an inscription which reads “FREE HOMES / FOR / FREE PEOPLE” (Fig. 1). Residents who have been walking around their neighborhoods using well-known routes, such as an old woman with a shopping cart in a drawing in chapter *Ą. Przestrzały* [*Ą. Clearances*], are forced to change their ways because new construction sites pop up everywhere. Today, capitalist property law

¹⁵Władysław Strzemiński, “Łódź sfunkcjonalizowana” [Łódź functionalized], in idem: *Pisma* [Writings], selected and edited by Zofia Baranowicz (Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1975), 324.

protects development land, just as did the plot in the past. It is “podstawow[a] jednostk[a] wszelkich planów budowlanych” [the basic unit of all construction plans], “system prywatnej własności w stosunku do terenów miejskich” [a system of private property of urban areas].¹⁶

“Every square meter of a tenement house was supposed to yield profit [...]. At the same time, ‘industrial barons’¹⁷ [...] decorated their homes with anything as long as it was aesthetic, turning their apartments into a hot mess,”¹⁸ one scholar writes about the motivations behind Szczuka’s art. In Kłudkiewicz’s book, the new driving force behind old problems turns out to be, above all, revitalization, an aesthetic revitalization, symbolized by an elegant and decorative façade of an interwar tenement house. Hoża is transformed into a charming metropolitan street, complete with gardens, restaurants, cafes, and tourists. At the same time, it undergoes progressive gentrification, as seen in other streets in Warsaw’s downtown district. From Kłudkiewicz’s perspective, Hoża is a space of urban contrasts, housing problems, and social inequalities. Similar problems were described in avant-garde poems from the 1920s:

Pomimo tych wszystkich śródmiejskich luksusów, restauracji, apartamentów i loftów nieraz minimy tu kogoś z listy stu najbiedniejszych Polaków. Robią się widoczni na wiosnę, to właśnie wtedy pojawiają się skądś zbieracze puszek, parkingowi stacze i panowie sępiący piwo. W tym oceanie nieszczęść, brudnych ciuchów, alkoholu, chorób i samotności niektórzy wydają się prawdziwymi ulicznymi osobowościami [Despite all the luxuries, restaurants, apartments, and lofts found downtown, we may still come across one of the hundred poorest Poles. They become visible in the spring, that’s when can collectors, parking lot attendants, and people drinking beer appear out of nowhere. In this ocean of misery, dirty clothes, alcohol, disease, and loneliness, some people appear to be real street characters] (H 88).

The difference is that Kłudkiewicz, unlike interwar artists, already knows that the urban and social utopias inspired by the avant-garde of the 1920s, such as the nationalization of real estate after WW2 and the modernist reconstruction of Warsaw, did not solve the pressing problems of modernity. On the contrary, they generated new tensions and injustices.

The author also observes how Hoża’s avant-garde modernist architecture gives way to the tendency to revive the atmosphere of the *belle époque*. It is sometimes achieved through superficial operations performed on modernist buildings from the 1950s, inspired by the likes of Le Corbusier, Oscar Niemeyer, and Walter Gropius. The interwar period is idealized, seen through the prism of a gentleman in a bowler hat riding in a horse-drawn carriage to a park:

Jest tu kilka takich domów jak mój – to trochę Jednostki Marsylskie, a trochę kamienice. Na dole są sklepy, ale kształt bryły jest mocno, po modernistycznym, wyeksponowany. Elewacja miała kiedyś coś z De Stijl, z gry płaszczyzn – niebieskich, białych i żółtych. Teraz blok jest pastelowo-słomkowy, udaje więc kamienicę już na dobre [Some houses are like my house – a crossover between the Marseille Housing Unit and a tenement house. There are shops downstairs, but the

¹⁶Strzemiński, “Łódź sfunkcjonalizowana”, 325.

¹⁷Mieczysław Szczuka, “Sztuka a rzeczywistość” [Art and reality], *Dźwignia* 4 (1927): 13.

¹⁸Aleksandra Więcek-Gigla, “Rewolucje Mieczysława Szczuki” [Mieczysław Szczuka’s revolutions], *Śląskie Studia Polonistyczne* 2 (2022): 4.



Fig. 2.
Paweł Kłudkiewicz,
Hoża. Moja ulica /
My street (Warsaw:
Schulewicz Publisher,
2022), 89

shape of the building is exposed, in a modernist fashion. The façade was once reminiscent of De Stijl – a creative arrangement of blue, white and yellow planes. Now the building is pastel, yellowish, and it pretends to be a tenement house for good] (H 29).

The modernist housing estates that still exist today “ze szkołą, przedszkolem i przychodnią” [with a school, a kindergarten, and a clinic] and “tanie i egalitarne” [cheap and egalitarian] government-subsidized cafeterias (H 90) prove, however, that sometimes architectural “socialist slogans” promoted by the interwar avant-garde were taken seriously.

At home

People who evict tenants in the 21st century, people who “odcinając ludziom wodę i prąd, a potem nasyłając zbirów” [cut off people’s water and electricity supply, and then send in thugs] (H 26), appeared, as Kłudkiewicz emphasizes, when capitalism returned to Poland. It is significant that concurrently, black, white, and red began to dominate in Polish public space again, although this time thanks to street art, which is one of the topics of the book (*R. Street art*). The constructivist colors used by Kłudkiewicz seem to also be a reference to the works of the art duo Twożywo, which reacted critically to the return of capitalism to Poland in the 1990s. The duo is also important as regards the autobiographical context of the book:

On the one hand, people were desperately hungry for “splendid Western flavors,” which is completely understandable considering the bleakness and forced asceticism of the 1980s. On the other hand, the first milk teeth of the new order were growing, perhaps best illustrated by the ubiquitous “market stalls,” which were ultimately replaced by towering skyscrapers penetrating the sky.¹⁹

The artists openly admit that “constructivist, Soviet avant-garde”²⁰ was an important point of reference in their art. Such inspirations can be very direct:

Constructivist language of graphic art – geometric shapes and the use of black, white, and red – played an important role in their visual vocabulary. [...]. In El Lissitzky’s famous poster a red wedge was driven into a white circle and in one of Twożywo’s murals two typographic figures collided – a red circle [...] and a black square [...]. The artists used propaganda language to create an anti-propaganda and ambiguous message. At the same time, they seemed to best implement the ideals of the Soviet avant-garde, actually acting in social space and never turning into an artistic brand locked in the golden cage of the art market.²¹

Such avant-garde and street art references also suggest that Hoża is once again in a transitional period, just like Europe in Stern’s catastrophic poem, and the city during the Polish political transformation of the early 1990s, as shown by Twożywo. We are witnessing crisis and change. Kłudkiewicz associates it with the time of the pandemic, foreseeing that what he described and drew would be, by the time the book was published, largely “fragmentem staroego świata” [a particle of the old world] (H 9).

It is therefore clear that the longevity of avant-garde aesthetics results not so much (or not only) from its aesthetic values but also from its function: avant-garde art points to and comments on social problems. Red in avant-garde art may be read in those terms as well: red is

¹⁹Mariusz Libel, “Nie ma jednej odpowiedzi – z Mariuszem Libelem rozmawiają Konrad Kubala oraz Przemysław Pluciński” [There is no single answer – Konrad Kubala and Przemysław Pluciński interview Mariusz Libel], *Władza Sądzenia* 19 (2020): 204.

²⁰Libel, 207.

²¹Karol Sienkiewicz, *Twożywo*, <https://culture.pl/pl/tworca/twozywo>, date of access 10 Dec. 2023. See also: Mariusz Libel, Krzysztof Sidorek, Katarzyna Tórz, *Plądrujemy ruiny rzeczywistości* [We are plundering the ruins of reality], ed. Katarzyna Tórz (Warsaw: Osman Djajadisastra, 2020); Magdalena Lachman, “Dynamika reaktywacji: Uwie(r)żyć na słowo... grupie Twożywo?” [The dynamics of reactivation: Do you trust ... the Twożywo group?], *Acta Universitatis Lodzianensis* 41 (2022).

a color of warning. It attracts attention but it also says: “be careful.” Indeed, road signs also use red. Associating red with the masses in the interwar period indicated a problematic tension. If avant-garde colors still prove to be relevant and necessary in the 21st century, it is perhaps because the same social problems are still relevant.

However, in Kłudkiewicz’s book, red does not carry class connotations. Red is, for the most part, the color of the sky and the trees. The latter are an important element of the cityscape, as one of the opening chapters informs us that a “tunel gałęzi” [tunnel formed by tree branches] is a symbol of Hoża. Below the text Kłudkiewicz drew a sidewalk. Plants grow in the cracks and leaves may be seen lying around. This image, respectively, calls to mind the poem *Europa*: “Ten zielony kiel trawki / ściśniętej dwiema płytami trotuaru” [This green tusk of grass / squeezed in-between two sidewalk slabs].²² Red tree crowns which become one with the sky are disturbing. They seem to signal danger and attract attention. They are a warning sign. Red also symbolizes a distractive noise, such as the sounds of ambulance sirens (H 51–52).

Ecological concerns are thus incorporated into the visual layer of the book. They are rarely expressed directly: “Wśród gałęzi latarni powiewają foliowe torebki – śmieci, które produkujemy, są piekielnie trwałe” [Plastic bags are flying among the branches of streetlamps – the garbage we produce will not decompose for a very long time] (H 81). Cars, which are an integral part of cityscapes drawn by Kłudkiewicz, are also part of the problem: “I samochody – są uciążliwe, jest ich za dużo, trąbią i robią dużo chamskiego hałasu. Może kiedyś znikną? Tak jak nie ma już przecież w miastach odoru nawozu i umęczonych miejskich koni” [And cars – they are a nuisance, there are too many of them, they honk and make a lot of noise. Maybe they will disappear someday? The smell of manure and tired city horses are, after all, a thing of the past] (H 32).

Pollution that Kłudkiewicz writes about in chapter *T. New pollution* also concerns information technology and urban communication (Fig. 3). It brings to mind Stern’s *Europa* once again: “życie miasta / o wszelkiej porze / koncert polifoniczny / drutów / stuków / „Pacyfik” / rur kanalizacyjnych” [city life / at any time / a polyphonic concert / of wires / clicks / the “Pacific” / of sewage pipes].²³

Na całym świecie, a więc także na ulicy Hożej, trwa nieskończony przyrost infrastruktury. Trudno wyobrazić sobie miasto bez śmieciowego ekosystemu z tabliczek, lian-rur i metalowych drzew-słupów. Ulice wciąż obrastają kolejnymi znakami, sygnalizatorami, tabliczkami i odsyłaczami. Na dachach domów niczym syreny na dziobach okrętów prężą się konstrukcje telefonicznych masztów. [...] Sploty rur wentylacyjnych na tyłach restauracji to żywe obrazy H. R. Giger [All over the world, including Hoża, there is an endless increase in infrastructure. It is difficult to imagine a city without a garbage ecosystem of signs, lianas-pipes, and metal trees-poles. The streets are constantly being covered with new signs, traffic lights, plaques, and marks. Phone masts on the roofs are like sirens on the bows of ships. [...] Ventilation pipes in the back of restaurants are living paintings by H. R. Giger] (H 81).

²²Anatol Stern, “Europa”, *Reflektor* 3 (1925): 100.

²³Stern, 99.



Fig. 3.
Paweł Kłudkiewicz, *Hoża*.
Moja ulica / My street
(Warsaw: Schulewicz
Publisher, 2022), 73

The writer-illustrator organizes his chapters using the alphabet, which may directly refer to the opening line of the avant-garde poem *Europa*: A, B, C. However, in the story about Hoża, the alphabetical order is arbitrary. It fails to tame city life with its logic. Since there is no direct connection between the letter and the title of the chapter – *Ą. Przestrzały* [*Ą. Clearances*], *D. Mój blok* [*D. My block of flats*], *O. Początek ulicy* [*O. The beginning of the street*] (except for *P. Parę osób na Hożej* [*P. People on Hoża*] which only emphasizes the randomness of other pairings). *Europa* and *Hoża. Moja ulica / My Street* demonstrate that modern life does not easily lend itself to logical ordering. Respectively, both works – in their respective timeframes

– show that it is impossible to talk about the contemporary city using only words: “ja tego nie mogę / ja tego nie chcę wyrazić słowami” [I can’t do it / I don’t want to express it in words].²⁴ Combining language and image, writing and drawing, is more functional: “I kiedyś właśnie wracając z hałasu ulicy w ciszę klatki schodowej, zacząłem się zastanawiać: jak podzielić się tym moim doświadczeniem okolicy? Jasne, niech będą fakty i historie, ale przede wszystkim niech pojawi się smak, wrażenia – tej ulicy i tego miasta” [One day, when I was returning from the noise of the street into the silence of the staircase, I began to wonder: how to share my experience of my neighborhood? Sure, let me use facts and stories, but above all, let me share tastes and impressions – of this street and this city] (H 10).

The modern urban iconosphere as communication chaos; the chaos of signs, ads, and slogans; the polyphony of noises; and a deafening excess of information seem to be a persistent *topos*, at least since the times of the avant-garde. The poem *Europa* and its film adaptation by Franciszka and Stefan Themerson (1928) symbolize a breakthrough in the imagination of the Polish avant-garde art – the moment when the modern city ceases to be an object of admiration and hope for a better tomorrow and becomes an object of criticism. “Silent yards are no more. We can no longer enter spaces where it is possible to think, to ignore the noise of the nightmare of the society of the spectacle that has come true. The logorrhea of word-images keeps one awake. All meaning is lost in multiplied messages,”²⁵ wrote one scholar about the context in which the street art of *Twożywo* should be interpreted at the threshold of this century. However, logorrhea, both capitalist and political, was already described in Stern’s *Europa*. Immersed in modern urban imagination, the works of *Twożywo* and Kłudkiewicz, in its poster-like aesthetics, seem to find a way back to those other, silent, spaces.

Hoża. Moja ulica / My street is an authorial book. It was written and drawn by one person and not created by an artistic and literary collective, as many avant-garde logovisual works. Kłudkiewicz does not mention *Europa* as one of his inspirations in the introduction to the book. Instead, he writes about the images of New York on the covers of *The New Yorker*, the images of Paris, Rome, or Istanbul in a Czech children’s book, or the images of Brooklyn in Spike Lee’s *Do the Right Thing*. As in *Europa* in the 1920s,²⁶ the visual layer of the book plays with many logovisual genres characteristic of the modern urban iconosphere: maps, posters, placards, signs, logos, comics, spatial planning models, picture books, movie stills (for example, from Andrzej Barański’s *Parę osób, mały czas* [A Few People, a Little Time] which talks about the relationship between Jadwiga Stańczakowa, who lived at Hoża, and Miron Białoszewski). Importantly, Kłudkiewicz consistently draws by hand and does not use montages or photocollages. He also emphasizes this fact in the introduction, writing about “maniakaln[e] sesj[e] temperowania ołówka” [maniacal pencil-sharpening sessions] (H 9). The hand-drawn line contrasts with the black and red computer font used to write the short lyrical reportages about Hoża. Thanks to the hand-drawn, this urban reality, this “architektoniczny patchwork” [architectural patchwork] (H 14), which Hoża has become as a result of WW2 and, respectively,

²⁴Stern, 100.

²⁵Wojciech Burszta, “W ruinach sensu”, in: Libel, Sidorek, Tórz, 52.

²⁶Kałuża, 13.

as a result of (un)realized or unfinished modernization projects (such as “[p]lac, którego nie ma” [a square that does not exist] which would embody the style of the “stalinowski barok” [Stalinist baroque] [H 38]), seems to be an intimate, inhabited, and individualized space.

Although modernist housing estates were designed as rectangles or squares (which is also clearly visible in Kłudkiewicz’s drawings) – and thus subordinated to modernist straight lines²⁷ – Hoża, as Kłudkiewicz writes, can be explored using shortcuts. One can circle around the neighborhood: “Strukturze tej bliżej do kształtu ameby niż kwadratu” [This structure is more like an amoeba than a square] (H 18). Shabby walls and dilapidated tenement houses can give rise to creativity, street festivals, galleries, and publishing houses (H 58). The power of stories can bring back Witkacy, Białoszewski, and Zadie Smith, all of whom were or are associated with Hoża. Instead of a utopia or a revolution, Kłudkiewicz wants us to feel at home in the world of modernist architecture and its relics. At the same time, he wants us to still find inspiration in the avant-garde. Developing and transforming the world is not about tearing down and building something completely new. It is about using gaps, free spaces, and “clearances” (H 18) in a creative way.

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

²⁷Tim Ingold, *Lines. A Brief History* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 167.

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KEYWORDS

Paweł Kłudkiewicz

Hoża. Moja ulica / My Street

CONSTRUCTIVISM

the interwar period

ABSTRACT:

The present article examines the avant-garde inspirations behind Paweł Kłudkiewicz's book *Hoża. Moja ulica / My Street* (2022). Particular attention is paid to the role of logovisuality in the urban context as well as to the function of the colors black, red, and white which refer to the constructivist and socially engaged projects of the first avant-garde. Direct references to Anatol Stern, Mieczysław Szczuka and Teresa Żarnower's *Europa: A Poem* and references to the aesthetics of the art duo Twożywo, drawing directly from constructivist art, are also discussed. The article argues that such aesthetics conveys a social and political message in Kłudkiewicz's book (as regards social inequalities, distortions of capitalism, and modern urbanism in contemporary and interwar Warsaw).

E u r o p a

LOGOVISUALITY

city

RED

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Weaving the body into text.

The issue of corporeality in Ilse Garnier's *Blason du corps féminin*

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“Talking about the representation of experience, it is impossible to ignore the body, which becomes an essential point of reference for the human experience”¹ – this sentiment was undoubtedly shared by Ilse Garnier, as she was creating *Blason du corps féminin* [*Blason of the female body*].

Blason du corps féminin is a French-language spatial volume, published in 1979 by Éditions André Silvaire². It is a unique volume, not only against the background of Garnier's entire work, but also other concrete poets from the 1960s and 1970s. Its uniqueness is evident in the choice of the subject and the genre declaration. Its most innovative aspect, however, is the form of the poems, combining the word and the line (early examples of concrete poetry were usually based on letters alone). In her poems Garnier discusses the experiences of the female body. Each of the poems consists of a verbal and pictorial image of a woman in different situ-

¹ Adam Dziadek, *Projekt krytyki somatycznej* [A project of somatic criticism] (Warszawa: Instytut Badań Literackich, 2014), 20.

² In this work I am referring to the second edition of the work (Paris: L'herbe qui tremble, 2010).

ations – resulting from biological conditions, arbitrarily assigned social roles or stereotypes. It is no coincidence that the title of the volume refers to the literary genre, which was popular in 16th century France, and written by men: the *blason*, which tended to objectify women. Garnier attempts a subversive reappropriation of the genre. Like the French feminist philosopher Hélène Cixous, she believes that by censoring a woman's body, her breathing, speech and thoughts are censored too³. The path to women's liberation leads through the freedom of their bodies.

The body in the text

Ilse Garnier, like many artists in recent decades, deconstructs and demythologizes the body. This process is directed against a culture which is perceived as repressive and paternalistic⁴. Garnier brings together the female body, dismembered by 15th-century poets of the *blason* (men). With the help of a line she emphasizes individual elements of that body, but this emphasis is never intended to draw attention to the aesthetic qualities of the body. In this way, the poet liberates perspectives on female bodies and thinking about femininity from the fallacy contained in the popular slogan of the 70s: "Our body is ourselves."⁵ The utopian character of this otherwise legitimate claim is revealed all the more vividly against the background of the processes of sexualization and objectification of bodies⁶, which was intensifying at that same time. The poet recognizes that the body is a social phenomenon: it does not exist in a vacuum, but on the treadmill of requirements, roles and various limitations. A kind of remedy for patterns which were unrealistic, virtually impossible to reproduce, would be women's writing about what had been carefully hidden: "By regaining their body, appropriated and prostituted by a masculinized culture, women present themselves in ways hitherto absent from art: ugly, old, sick, disfigured by post-surgery scars, humiliated by shameful female ailments. The aesthetic armor, protecting the naked body for centuries, has been crushed."⁷ The artists also gained the opportunity to tell stories from their own perspective: both about the benefits and disadvantages of being in the body. Garnier stresses, therefore, that the female body is capable of giving tenderness, of receiving it, of creating a new human being – or, in its freedom, of relishing emptiness. It is the source of music (even if it is unconscious, coming from within the belly), for its resident and for those who love her, it can be the sun and the moon. The poet points out, however, that even the same body in a different situation or in a different context can become a space of oppression (prison, confinement), lack of agency (silencing, control), a source of many grievances, traumas and unhappiness. Garnier is well aware that the experiences she discusses in *Blason du corps féminin* are not separate, individual cases. These are the experiences of many of us (women) every day.

³ See Hélène Cixous, „Śmiech Meduzy” [„Medusa's laughter”, transl. by Anna Nasiłowska, *Teksty Drugie* 4/5/6 (22/23/24) (1993): 152.

⁴ See Maria Poprzęcka, *Akt polski* [The Polish nude] (Warszawa: Edipresse, 2006), 87.

⁵ See Lynda Nead, *Akt kobiecy: sztuka, obscena i seksualność* [The female nude: art, obscenity and sexuality], transl. by Ewa Franus (Poznań: Rebis, 1998), 17.

⁶ See Poprzęcka, 89–90.

⁷ Poprzęcka, 89–90.

Writing about voice, Junzō Kawada noticed: “Although it is a phenomenon which arises in my own body, my voice, as soon as it crosses the threshold of my mouth, becomes a common property that I must share with others.”⁸ It is not different with a recovered narrative. The story of a single woman-artist, “uttered” aloud, can become an emanation of multiple confessions, thus connecting women in a community of experiences.

The logovisual act

In her works Ilse Garnier relies on a female silhouette. The poet never indicates that any of the women she “portrays” is wearing any clothes. One could therefore consider *Blason du corps féminin* to be a collection of female nudes of sorts. But here the question arises: can a drawn-written silhouette, whose shape is far from realistic, be called a nude?

“The nude act includes a certain proposal of a definition of a body and determines specific norms of its watching, therefore assuming a certain concept of a spectator⁹”, as Lynda Nead wrote. For years, the female nude has been subject to strict rigours of the canon. The task of the body was to reflect the harmony and beauty of a universe built “by measure, proportion, and weight”¹⁰. Famous Renaissance engravings, to name but Leonardo da Vinci’s *Vitruvian Man* and Albrecht Dürer’s *The proportions of the human body*, had a significant influence on this tendency. Maria Poprzęcka writes about these authors’ works that “In their reflections, the human body, like the space surrounding it, becomes an intellectual abstraction, a formal construct or a display of anatomical knowledge”¹¹. A natural consequence of this approach to art are, for example, numerous images of Venus featuring (canonically) ideal proportions. Reproducing a single model, which has little relation to reality, has real-life consequences for the perception of women’s bodies. When we add to this equation the component of a projected male viewer – the guardian of *the status quo* and the judge, the nude act can become “a means of mastering femininity and female sexuality.”¹² Paradoxically, focusing the male vision on the female body also leads to the opposite tendency, i.e. the now popular pornographization of the women’s image.

Following Kenneth Clark, Poprzęcka states that “the word act [...] evokes the image of a body in balance, certainty, and bloom, one which is fully formed, rather than defenseless and shrunken”¹³. This is a body that Garnier presents in *Blason du corps féminin* – not fragmented, as in Dürer’s paintings or in Marot’s *blasons*, not ‘pornographed’. The poet manages to achieve this effect without clearly indicating body parts. It is worth pointing out, however, that the shapes into which Garnier arranges her lines are not accidental. For example, in tantric Hinduism and in some Buddhist traditions, the circle corresponds to a woman. This symbolism is both sexual and cosmo-

⁸ Junzō Kawada, *Głos: studium z etnolingwistyki porównawczej* [The voice: a study of comparative ethnolinguistics], transl. Radosław Nowakowski (Kraków: Universitas, 2004), 9.

⁹ Nead, 15.

¹⁰ See Poprzęcka, 15.

¹¹ Poprzęcka, 17.

¹² Nead, 15.

¹³ Poprzęcka, 11.

logical¹⁴. In addition, one of the first identifiable rock paintings (as early as between 30 000 and 25 000 BC) depicted primarily oval female shapes¹⁵. The discontinuous form chosen by Garnier reflects the indeterminacy and multidimensionality of the female body. The poet does not try to force it into frames and canons; on the contrary – she leaves much to the imagination thanks to the use of non-literal linear shapes. For Garnier an important component of women's recovering their body is the change of the projected viewer. From now on it is not to be the object of male desire, but it should be able to exist for itself: strong, whole, in full bloom. The French-speaking poet also touches on more difficult experiences in her volume. But it is only through talking about an imperfect, broken, difficult body that it can be exposed completely: "In modern art the body also seems brutally dragged out of the artistic envelope that has protected it for centuries. Has it lost its beauty, its «perfect form» with which it has been connected for centuries? Such beauty had to be rejected [...] In place of perfection, truth has emerged."¹⁶

Eroticism and the sexualization of text

Although in her work Ilse Garnier tries to deny that the nude act is "an image intended to be seen by a man, on which the representation of a woman is so constructed as to become the object of desire,"¹⁷ this intention stands in a relation of tension with the introduction to the volume.

Roland Barthes wrote, "the tongue destroys the body, returns it to the fetish."¹⁸ Pierre Garnier's introduction actually equates Ilse's poetry with her body. For the poet his wife's poems are corporeal, tangible, to the point that he creates an intimate, even sexual relationship with them: "So far special poetry has not yet 'given' love – here it awakens it. I handle these poems like I would a girl; for the first time, my body agrees with writing."¹⁹ Garnier, true to his style, refers to the body by means of numerous metaphors. He skillfully operates the juxtapositions of bright/dark and warm/cold. Ilse's body is likened to a "theatre of light," a "shining horizon,"²⁰ or a space in which one can "warm oneself in the heat."²¹ Heat, however, can also manifest itself in the form of fire, which has a dark side to it. As Garnier writes, "This pure body, through adjectives, experiences its hell, its paradise, remaining pure."²² Ilse's body has thus a chance to experience various, also negative, circumstances on the pages of the anthology, and thus try to find itself in them, "feel": "[...] the noun *corps*, capturing lines and curves is fulfilled through writing

¹⁴See Rosemary Sassoon, Albertine Gaur, *Signs, Symbols and Icons: Pre-History to the Computer Age* (Exeter: Intellect Books, 1997), 56.

¹⁵See André Leroi-Gourhan, *Gesture and Speech*, transl. by Anna Bostock Berger (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993), 372.

¹⁶Poprzęcka, 91.

¹⁷Poprzęcka, 15.

¹⁸Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, transl. by Richard Miller (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 113.

¹⁹„Jusqu' alors la poésie spatiale ne donnait pas l'amour – ici elle le suscite. Je me conduis avec ces poèmes comme avec une fille; pour la première fois mon corps fait droit à l'écriture"; Pierre Garnier, „Préface”, in: *Blason du corps féminin* (Paris: Herbe qui tremble, 2010), 13.

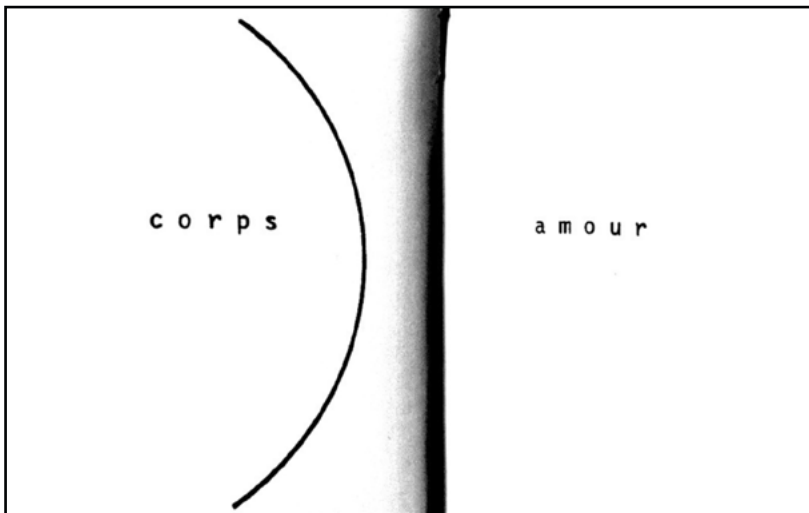
²⁰Pierre Garnier, 11.

²¹Pierre Garnier, 13.

²²„Ce corps pur – à travers les adjectifs – vit son enfer son paradis en restant pur”; Pierre Garnier, 12.

– it becomes Light through torture, fire, pliers. In this word, electrical and light phenomena also occur.”²³ Gradually, Garnier is getting lost in bolder and bolder culture-immersed metaphors. He describes Ilse’s body as the body of Saint Dionysius, an abused body, a virginal body and even Christ’s body ... All these are references to Christian culture. In the introduction to *Blason...*, one can notice a transformation of the biblical theme: the Word “re-creates” the body (“a body dressed in its own name, which invents it”²⁴) and, consequently, becomes it. This is how a poetry of the body is created: natural, organic, “simpler than water.”²⁵ The poet admires its structure, drowns in it unconditionally. For Garnier, Ilse’s text and body merge into one.

The climax, however, occurs in a very literal confession: “I want to make love to a noun.”²⁶ The noun “body” is perceived by Garnier in an almost synesthetic way, with all senses. You can touch it, you can look at it, you can taste it: “between the flower and the fruit [...] a body-flower that you see, a body-fruit that you eat.”²⁷ The poet devours the text-body of his wife, which gradually flourishes before his eyes. All this awakens a stronger desire in him and evokes his sexual fantasies: “This body of Ilse, which evolves in a dream from page to page, which flows, which is scattered, meets in its name [...] to make love with a female fetus — only with an egg — a body in fire and smoke [...]” The body smaller and larger from page to page — the smooth point of the universe — oh, if God were desire!²⁸ On all the pages Garnier’s amorous exaltations are accompanied by the work *corps amour* [‘body love’]. The words “body” and “love” are always written on two separate pages, which, when scanned, look like they are separated by a thick black line. I will try to demonstrate that this crack is not meaningless.



body love; Ilse
Garnier, *Blason du
corps féminin* (Paris:
L’herbe qui tremble,
2010), 20–21

²³ „[...] le nom corps accaparant traits et courbes s’accomplit par les moyens de l’écriture – devant Lumière par la torture, le feu, les tenailles. Dans ce nom se passent aussi les phénomènes électriques et lumineux”; Pierre Garnier, 15.

²⁴ „corps vêtu de son nom qui l’invente”; Pierre Garnier, 19.

²⁵ „plus simple que l’eau”; Pierre Garnier, 20.

²⁶ „J’ai envie de faire l’amour avec un nom”; Pierre Garnier, 13.

²⁷ „entre fleur et fruit [...] corps-fleur, ce corps qu’on voit, corps-fruit, ce corps qu’on mange”; Pierre Garnier, 19.

²⁸ „Ce corps d’Ilse qui progresse en rêve de page en page, qui coule, s’éparpille, se réunit dans son nom [...] faire l’amour avec un foetus féminin – avec l’ovule seul – le corps en feu et en fumée [...] Le corps de page en page plus petit et plus grand – point univers lisse – ah, si le désir était Dieu!”; Pierre Garnier, 18.

Pierre Garnier's amorous descriptions correspond to the postulates of *L'érotisme spatialiste* [*Spatial eroticism*], originally published in the journal "Approches" in March 1966 and then reprinted in the collection *Spatialisme et poésie concrète*. This is a short article written jointly by the Garniers. In it the poets point to the physical-kinetic nature of spatial love: "Our eroticism is energy and structures, physical and aesthetic; these are vortices, impulses, particle exchanges, waves, radiation, spatially distributed throughout the body: it is a man and a woman in their gravitational fields."²⁹ Eroticism in spatial poetry is thus supposed to be based on the mutual exchange of energy between a woman and a man (in their text the poets only consider love in the heterosexual variant). An important element of the erotic influence – as in the whole spatial movement – is the category of motion: "Spatial erotic works are therefore primarily kinetic works; our desire is no longer locked in an unconscious dream, but it is released by means of radiation and motion."³⁰ The desire for another person can be transformed into energy produced from movement and then transferred onto paper in the form of a poem. Interestingly, in the spatial form of eroticism, the Garniers also see a space for women's emancipation: "The fact that spatial texts have no subject, verb or object means that there is love without the man-master and woman-object, without a myth, without taboo."³¹ The poets, therefore, see in a spatial arrangement of words and the abandonment of syntagma a possibility of liberating oneself also from the yoke of patriarchal schemes. The cosmic-energetic romance of particles would be far from the universal idea of love based on "rape and possession."³² The man is freed from his centuries' old role of a conquistador, and the woman – no longer an object – becomes a subject.

The presence of women's voices is crucial for recovering their own subjectivity. Meanwhile, the introduction to *Blason du corps féminin* was written by the poet's husband, Pierre Garnier. This is nothing unique, as it was a common practice for the spouses to write introductions to each other's works. In the case of this volume, however, this is a surprising choice. After all, in her *Blason...* Ilse Garnier is trying to reverse the harmful tendency encoded in the tradition of the genre, in which it is men who talk about the female body. It is therefore peculiar that the poet allows her husband to re-objectify her body in the *blason* format. This strategy also seems to counter Hélène Cixous' postulate, which hovers over this logovisual volume: "I write like a woman: because a woman should write a woman. And a man should write a man."³³ Garnier's introduction – even though the author is aware of the notorious history of the blason – somehow takes us back to the times before the revolution heralded by feminist critics and the *écriture féminine* trend. Garnier is also aware of the "silence" of the female body³⁴. He even seems to applaud Cixous's indirect reference to Ilse: "your body must be heard."³⁵ The poet forgets, however, that for the female voice to

²⁹ „Notre érotisme est une énergie et structures, c'est-à-dire physique et esthétique; il est tourbillons, impulsions, échanges particulaires, ondes, radiations, spatialisé dans tout le corps: c'est l'homme et la femme dans leurs champs gravitationnels"; Ilse Garnier, Pierre Garnier, „L'érotisme spatialiste", in: Pierre Garnier, *Spatialisme et poésie concrète* (Paris: Gallimard, 1968), 180.

³⁰ „Les œuvres érotiques spatialistes sont donc surtout des œuvres cinétiques; notre désir n'est plus enclos dans le rêve inconscient, mais dégagé il est rayonnement et mouvement"; Garnier and Garnier, 179.

³¹ „Le fait que dans les textes spatiaux il n'y ait plus ni sujet ni verbe ni objet signifie un amour sans mâle-maitre ni femelle-objet, sans mythe, sans tabou"; Garnier and Garnier, 179.

³² See Garnier and Garnier, 180.

³³ Cixous, 149.

³⁴ See Pierre Garnier, „Préface", 10.

³⁵ Cixous, 152.

be heard, the male voice must fall silent for a while. In the introduction to *Blason...* the voice of the female body is only mediated through the story of another, as Cixous would write.

Of course, Pierre does not focus solely on the advantages (or worse – the vices) of Ilse's body. Still, having ploughed through a pile of metaphors, we arrive at quite a literal description of the poet's desire. Again, the blason pattern is repeated: a text which purportedly concerns the female body is not interested in the woman at all. This subject matter is just a pretext for a story about men and their desires. The body which is supposed to be regained by women yet again seems to them "strangely foreign [...] as if sick or dead."³⁶

It is possible that Ilse Garnier made a conscious decision to have a male voice in her introduction. Perhaps this is her provocation, aimed to illustrate the mechanism of objectifying women in Renaissance *blasons* and the imperceptible pathways through which this tendency permeates modern texts. It is more likely, however, that the poet simply missed the context of the situation and – paradoxically – it is the best illustration of how difficult it is to free oneself from the mechanisms that have been perpetuated over the years. This version is also confirmed by the passage from Garnier's introduction, in which the poet delights in the agency given to his wife's body: "While a woman's body [...] was the object of praise, it is the one that praises now; still life becomes a dazzling nature, the impregnated body becomes an impregnating body, the forbidden body becomes a forbidding body, the abandoned body becomes a light-body."³⁷ The Frenchman seems unaware of how bizarre these words are in the context of his introduction to the volume. Perhaps sexualizing the text of *Blason du corps féminin* and submitting it to the male gaze was inevitable. Maybe Ilse's body, emerging from her works, was sending unambiguous signals to Pierre, and their effect needed to find its outlet somewhere. There is no escaping from the male-female game and from the roles which it writes for us. As Jakub Jański states, "The text/body oozes with sexuality and eroticism and behaves in a completely different ways when seen with a man's eyes and when it is perceived by a woman, always speaking »only to me« – »me« as a man and »me« as a woman. To me as a man or to me as a woman. In other words, [...] it looks at the reader in a lustful way, inviting them to participate in a sophisticated erotic game of imposing unique meanings."³⁸ Moreover, the fatality of trying to escape from old patterns is doubly manifested. Jański also notes that "the work always reinterprets the existing situation. The work is deeply rooted in tradition, even when it tries to break that tradition."³⁹ The body, which tried so hard to "write itself", allowed itself to be written again, following the old pattern.

The corporeality of a printed text

Discussing the relationship between the poet's body and her text, it is impossible to ignore the process of creating the collection *Blason du corps féminin*, which consists of two stages.

³⁶Cixous, 152.

³⁷ „Alors que le corps féminin [...] était l'objet de blasons, c'est lui qui maintenant blasonne; la nature morte devient nature rayonnante, le corps fécondé devient corps fécondant, le corps interdit devient le corps interdisant, le corps abandonné le corps lumière [...]”; Pierre Garnier, „Préface”, 11.

³⁸See Natalia Anna Michna, „Iwaszkiewicz – seksualizacja tekstu i tekstualizacja seksu” [“Iwaszkiewicz - sexualisation of text and textualisation of sex”], *Zeszyty Naukowe Towarzystwa Doktorantów UJ Nauki Humanistyczne* 6 (1) (2013): 176.

³⁹Michna, 179.

The first of them is the hand-drawing of semicircular lines with a black fine liner and a piece of rubber tube, which performs the role of a self-made compass. The second stage is typing the letters on a typewriter. Following Kalina Kupczyńska, I call this form of drawing and text drawing-writing⁴⁰. In order to perform both activities, Garnier must set his body in motion. He needs his muscles for this work – not only those of the hand and forearm, but also of his back – and an efficient eye-hand coordination⁴¹. It is no coincidence that Tim Ingold compares the writing process to weaving⁴². Instead of fibers, however, Garnier braids the words. In addition, as Kupczyńska notes, the drawing-writing hand marks the individuality of the artist, in a way reflecting her character through the shape and other qualitative features of the line⁴³.

It is worth mentioning, however, that the finished volume, which reaches the reader, is not exactly the one created by Ilse Garnier at her Picardy home in Saisseval. This raises the following questions: can a work mediated by print be considered the same as a hand-drawn one? Is a drawn-written, but reprinted text – following Barthes' formula – still “a body”⁴⁴? To what extent can the poet's sketches be treated on a par with prints? In fact, the finished, reprinted work differs from the handwritten records of the author even on the level of appearance. Printing forces the text to comply with the typographic order and to adapt to specific spatial framework in a much more ruthless way than handwriting does. This is due to the mechanics of the printing method, which does not accept changes so easily. The fairly rigid framework of print also increases the readability of the text, focusing it on the recipient. What is more, it could be said that the reprinted work becomes a multi-author text, as it also involves publishers, editors, proofreaders or printers. The printing process thus obliterates the writing body's traces, left on the manuscript, making the reader fenced off from the author like never before⁴⁵.

The work mediated by the print medium is therefore clearly distancing itself from the author's corporeality. As Walter J. Ong points out, „It is interesting how much printing does not tolerate physical incompleteness⁴⁶”; „Print reinforces a sense of closure, a sense that what is in the text is final and has reached the state of completion⁴⁷”. Meanwhile, the drawn-written work is opposed to this attitude: it is in a continuous process, it is constantly becoming. Is it possible to get out of this impasse? Perhaps Ong is right in his pessimism that we cannot „create a text simply from the living experience”⁴⁸. However, my sense is that in the reprinted work there are still particles of the initial energy of the person who created that work. Thanks to that energy *Blason...* can „be in dialog with the world outside its borders”.⁴⁹

⁴⁰See Kalina Kupczyńska, „Ryso-pisanie, linio-wizualność i (formalne) stany krytyczne w komiksie autobiograficznym” [„Drawing-writing, line-visibility and (formal) critical states in an autobiographical comic book”], *Teksty Drugie* 1 (2022): 85.

⁴¹See Marta Rakoczy, „Materia, ciało, wizualność, czyli jak lepiej zrozumieć pisanie” [„Matter, body, visibility, or how to understand writing better”], *Teksty Drugie* 4 (2015): 24.

⁴²Tim Ingold, *Lines: A Brief History* (London: Routledge, 2016), 80.

⁴³See Kupczyńska, 85.

⁴⁴See Kupczyńska, 89.

⁴⁵See Walter J. Ong, *Oralność i piśmienność: słowo poddane technologii* [Orality and literacy: the technologising of the world], transl. by Józef Japola (Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2020), 200.

⁴⁶Ong, 200.

⁴⁷Ong, 199.

⁴⁸Ong, 201.

⁴⁹Ong, 200.

Ilse Garnier's *Blason du corps féminin* is based on dualities. First of all, on the most basic level, the works combine verbal and pictorial layers. Lines – following the principle of Peircean iconic similarity – in a way correspond to their verbal counterpart. It is through lexical graphics – thus via an intermediary – the body in this volume becomes more present.

W.J.T. Mitchell, writing about bimodality, stated that „The disciplines of word and image are like two countries where different languages are spoken, but which share a long history of reciprocal migration, cultural exchange and other forms of coexistence”.⁵⁰ Duality also occurs in Ilse Garnier's cooperation with Pierre. For a long time the spouses had been creating volumes together, as did Stefan and Franciszka Themerson. Over time, they settled for writing introductions to each other's volumes. In general, their relationship was marked by duality. Apart from the obvious aspect of the interlacing of female and male elements, they were a French-German marriage in times immediately after World War II, when the areas of Ilse's childhood were occupied by France. This certainly required numerous compromises due to cultural differences. Multilingualism became a way to build bridges in the works of the Garniers: not only French and German were used but also Picardic – the dying language of Pierre's small homeland. However, only the line is a universal, cross-cultural form of communication.

This dual kind of art which Ilse Garnier creates is therefore a product of her experiences, which the author subtly puts on paper. Even if she does not recall her own stories, she really does confide in her female readers, telling them about her experiences of living in a female body. But first and foremost, she reveals herself to us, uncovering her delight and anger. On the one hand, she is truly fascinated with women (she was inspired to write the volume by the women she saw during her trip to Senegal⁵¹), as well as with what their bodies are capable of. On the other hand, she objects strongly against objectifying, taming and stereotyping women. Many fallacies, as Mitchell rightly points out, depend on “silent acceptance of the superiority of words over images”. This is why whenever women – hitherto in the position of the objects of male desire in visual culture – start speaking up, it is perceived as a “transgressive and original” exception.⁵² In *Blason du corps féminin* Ilse Garnier rightly tries to show that the drawing-writing woman is not at all an “exception” but, quite on the contrary, the norm. Reclaiming one's own voice, however, is not a unique event but a continuous, slow process. “A woman must herself, with her own effort, enter the text – like in the world and history⁵³”. This change is ongoing.

translated by Justyna Rogos-Hebda

⁵⁰William J. Thomas Mitchell, „Słowo i obraz” [“Word and Image”], transl. by Sara Herczyńska, *Teksty Drugie* 1 (2022): 141.

⁵¹See Ilse Garnier, „Commentaires”, in: *Blason du corps féminin* (Paris: L'Herbe qui tremble, 2010), 74.

⁵²See Mitchell, 149.

⁵³Cixous, 147.

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KEYWORDS

SEXUALIZATION OF TEXT

ILSE GARNIER

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ABSTRACT:

The article analyses a variety of bundles of body and text in the volume *Blason du corps féminin* by the French spatial poet Ilse Garnier, considering social functions of the body presented in her works. Juxtaposing Garnier's output with the theories of Lynda Nead and Maria Poprzęcka, the author outlines the potential of *Blason...* as a collection of logovisual female nudes. The problematic status of Pierre Garnier's introduction to his wife's volume has also been addressed in the context of the postulated reclaiming of the genre for women and sexualization of the text. The article ends with a reflection, inspired by Walter J. Ong, concerning the degree to which a reprinted collection can still be considered a drawn-written and corporeal text.

female writing

female nude

CORPOREALITY

NOTE ON THE AUTHOR:

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What is the little thread doing? On a few (neo-)avant-garde projects

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I would like to begin with an explanation. I am not a professional editor or a historian of the avant-garde book; neither am I a bookbinding specialist, even though bookbindings are the subject matter of this essay. I am a scholar of modern literature and a poetry critic, and it is in the latter role – that of a user of literary field, participating in it through specific and often one-off interpretative interventions – that I would like to legitimize my voice. In the end, I concern myself here with contemporary poetry, one which seems relevant not only because of the typographic experiment it relies on. To the extent that I have familiarized myself with Polish works on bookbinding studies, I can declare I have not missed out on a lot.

In the most important works, including that of Janusz Tondel or Arkadiusz Wagner's edited volume of crucial essays, bookbinding studies – as a discipline concerning the art of book covers and bookbinding processes – deal with historical issues, problems of book reconstructions, collections and museum repositories¹. It fits somewhere between library studies, auxiliary sciences of museum studies, materials science and history of art. In this sense it is also fairly resistant to fads in the humanities, including “the pictorial turn” and “turn to things”, which more broadly encouraged me to reflect on the relationship between the typographic design of a poetic book and its functioning in the critical-literary sphere. This reflection inspired questions about the limits of a semiotic in-

¹ See *Tegmentologia polska dzisiaj. Polish bookbinding studies today*, ed. by Arkadiusz Wagner (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, 2015); Jakub Maciej Łubocki, „Okładkoznawstwo – stare zagadnienie, nowa koncepcja badawcza” [„Cover studies: old concept, new research idea”], *Zagadnienia Rodzajów Literackich* 63, 3 (2020): 61–78.

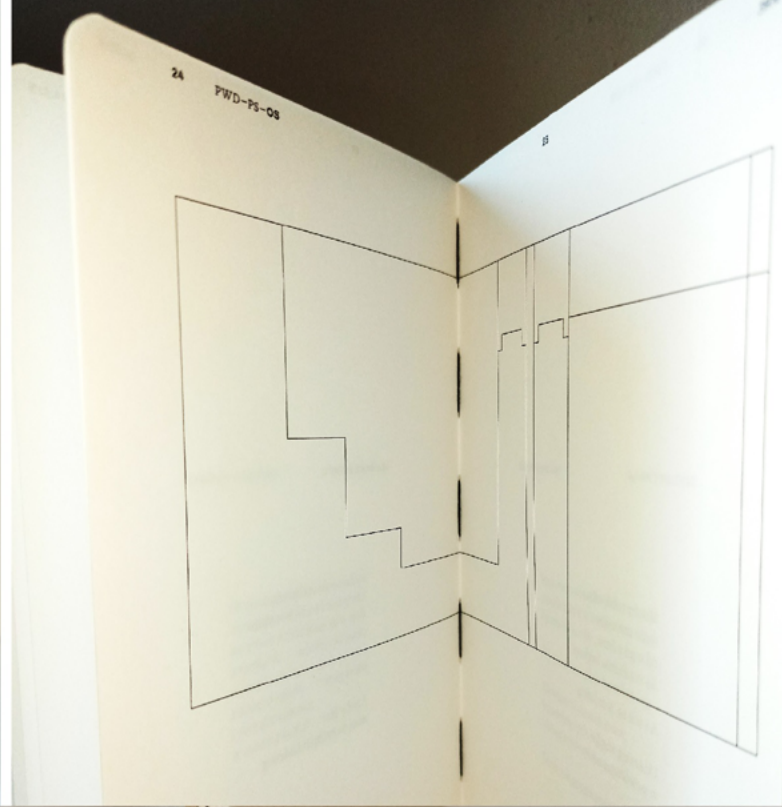
terpretation and its relationship with an embodied phenomenology of perception. Ultimately, this essay will not be a study of the object itself, i.e. the poetic book and the discourse concerning it, but it will constitute a test of its interpretative potential, which is released between the intentionally meaningful design of the book, its textual contents and the critics' practices of reading.

Of course, there are other important reflections, often akin to those concerning bookbinding, especially ones concerning book typography, their composition or the poetics of covers². These studies devote a lot of attention to the cover and graphic design, as if the very choice of paper, binding or spine finish were not meaningful enough. The object status of the book is thus reduced to such affordances with which the poet is able to interfere, in collusion with the designer (usually a graphic designer). If we consider the historical avant-garde of the 1920s and 1930s, there is no escaping the fact that whatever was not embraced under the umbrella of visibility was deemed of little importance. The capabilities of the printing houses or their financial resources then did not permit such experiments, with the exception of a limited number of independent artisan books, but even those were faced with the limitations of printing technology. Even in "common" works or those balancing on the boundary of multisensory and multimodal experiences, like *Sponad* [*From above*] by the Przyboś-Strzemiński collective, Anatol Stern and Mieczysław Szczuka's *Europa* [*Europe*] or the Thémersons' early books, the focus is mostly on visual aspects and their relationship with semantics.

In fact, it is no different during the Polish People's Republic (PRL) period. The issues of paper accessibility, technological resources, typographic and material capabilities were also limited and restricted the neo-avant-garde practices, so this kind of "aesthetic enstrangement" (as a formalist move) was limited to artists experimenting within the bounds of the Academy of Fine Arts workshops, to name but Andrzej and Ewa Partum or the so-called Wrocław Group. In consequence, their works were distributed in galleries rather than in books³. From this – another issue follows: the majority of studies discuss strictly artistic books (defined as such by different criteria), which

² These books constitute a majority and a lot of them concern neo-avant-garde and artistic books; see, e.g. Jan Straus's *Cięcie* [*The cut*] about the art of editing and the influence of the technique on the cover or Piotr Rypson's classical works, or the most recent one – Paweł Bernacki's *Polska książka artystyczna po 1989 roku w perspektywie bibliologicznej* [*Polish artistic book after 1989 in a bibliological perspective*] (2020). The latter is particularly useful due to its bibliological and communicological, rather than strictly editorial approach. Even so, it is perhaps less interesting for me as a poetry critic rather than art historian. It is worth pointing out that within the broader scope of cover studies (usually ignoring the issue of book spines) the emphasis was often put on the semantic aspect, rather than material properties, and on the position of the book in the communicative and cultural perspectives. Those kinds of works I would feel some affinity with. See, e.g. Piotr Rypson, *Książki i strony. Polska książka awangardowa i artystyczna 1919–1992* [*Books and pages. Polish avant-garde and artistic book 1919–1992*] (Warszawa: CSW Zamek Ujazdowski, 2000); Janusz Dunin, „Okładka i obwoluta jako komunikat. Wprowadzenie do problematyki” [„Cover and dust jacket as information. An introduction”], in: *Sztuka książki. Historia — teoria — praktyka* [*Book art. History – theory – practice*], ed. by Małgorzata Komza (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 2003): 83–90; Bożena Hojka, „Okładka książkowa z perspektywy komunikacyjnej” [„Book cover from the communicative perspective”], in: *W poszukiwaniu odpowiedniej formy. Rola wydawcy, typografa, artysty i technologii w pracy nad książką* [*In search for a proper form. The roles of publisher, typographer, artist and technology in book production*], ed. by Małgorzata Komza (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 2012), 61–72; Magdalena Lachman, „Okładkowy stan posiadania (w literaturze najnowszej)” [„Cover-based state of ownership (in contemporary literature)”], *Teksty Drugie* 6 (2012): 101–117; Jan Straus, *Cięcie. Fotomontaż na okładkach w międzywojennej Polsce* [*The cut. Photomontage on the covers in interwar Poland*] (Warszawa: Stowarzyszenie 40 000 Malarzy, 2014); Nicole Matthews, Nickianne Moody, *Judging a Book by Its Cover: Fans Publishers Designers and the Marketing of Fiction* (London: Routledge, 2016); Paweł Bernacki, *Polska książka artystyczna po 1989 roku w perspektywie bibliologicznej* [*Polish artistic book after 1989 in a bibliological perspective*] (Wrocław: Oficyna Wydawnicza ATUT, 2020).

³ I am referring here to broadly understood circles, which think about visual arts, artistic practices and objects rather than about following the rules – in the spirit of Pierre Bourdieu – of the modern literary field.



Il. 1
 Projekt edycji limitowanej tomu Pawła Stasiewicza „Oprawa skórzana”
 (wydawnictwo papierwdole/ K.I.T. Stowarzyszenie Żywych Poetów,
 2022). Kolejno na zdjęciu: okładka, szycie, projekt wnętrza, grzbiet.
 Projekt i koncepcja tomu, skład i projekt typograficzny: Paweł
 Stasiewicz [zdjęcia: JS, 2023].

in themselves can be regarded as works of art or literature⁴, created not so much as a compromise between the author, graphic/ designer and the printing house, as in consequence of the artist's individual work already at the stage of idea or concept, or even more broadly: in the context of the artist's struggle with the matter's resistance. But then we witness a shift in the emphasis from the level of the semantic and material shape of the book (which complement its content) to the artefact itself, with which we interact like we would with an object – as viewers, rather than readers. I will not delve into these complex typologies, let me just describe the issue briefly: the volumes which will be discussed in what follows are neither examples of literature nor of artisan books.

I am interested in a more basic issue, namely a fad, which opens up for literary criticism interesting gateways or entries into the text, that is: the relationship between a classic book of poetry in the codex format and an experimental visual project, especially the one concerned with bookbinding, in particular the spine. The titular little thread I would like to investigate is the stitching, more precisely – the numerous functions imposed on it by the poet or designer (usually in cooperation), which go beyond a simple binding of a block of sheets. Textbooks of editing (focused on the practical aspect, presently – the triumphant DTP) do not provide too much information on the design of book spines from the perspective of materials involved, and even less about the methods of gluing and stitching the block (more on that can be found in textbooks on bookbinding, especially in those published at the beginning of the 20th c., when bookbinding was still a living craft). Yet nowadays every digital printing house has a few personalized solutions on offer.. Following from the popularity of English craft-binding guidebooks published over the last few years, it can be stated the classical spine was first rejected by the contemporary enthusiasts of stationery, and that shift gradually made its way to the book market. The first beneficiaries of this turn were small publishing houses, following a new fad for “raw” style (exposed spine or stitching, which signal the “craftsmanship” of execution), all in the name of heightening the reader's tactile experience.

This essay primarily concerns poetic books published in small publishing houses, the publishers' ambitions, which border on craftsmanship and experiment, and the arrangements between the author and designer. In a review article I read a while ago (one I am unable to track down now) the author expressed their unease about the fact that our literary criticism started evaluating book covers and generalizing from those onto the content and value of the books themselves. At face value this allegation makes sense: as far as technical aspects of a volume (like the quality of the paper and the typographic project) must be considered as evidence for the publisher's professionalism (a positive example here are poetic publications of Warstwy), it seems that literally judging a book by its cover (or the graphics on that cover) is unjustified, just like

⁴ We must remember that in scholarly typologies, which divide artistic books into those containing contents/ information and book objects; the very label of literature is an addition and an umbrella term, construed (justifiably and effectively) for the purposes of incidental actions within the local field of neo-avant-garde experiment and museum-archival practices. It is impossible to underestimate the importance of the collection of the Book Art Museum in Łódź. This category, created by the practicing poet and scholar Zenon Fajfer and the researcher Katarzyna Bazarnik, is quite flexible and embraces a range of tendencies, from propositions of a new genre, through historical tales of visual and concrete poetry, variants of neo-avant-garde books, to artistic experiments featuring book objects. In my opinion it does not perform a typological function, even though the creation and reception of the text, as well as the communicative function of the book, have been given a boost by the authors of this concept. One can probably say that works recognized as literature should communicate something rather than simply be present. See Katarzyna Bazarnik, „Krótkie wprowadzenie do liberatury” [„A short introduction to liberature”], *Er(r)go* 2 (2003): 123–137; Zenon Fajfer, *Liberatura czyli literatura totalna. Teksty zebrane z lat 1999–2009* [Liberature or a total literature. Collected texts, 1999–2009], ed. by Katarzyna Bazarnik, introduction by Wojciech Kalaga (Kraków: Korporacja Ha!art, 2010).

it does not make sense to establish an interpretative concept of a film on the basis of what we see on a DVD box. However, for some books of poetry this element is not only important but actually key for the book's reading because it shifts our reception from semiotic towards tactile.

Following from this, my understanding of the (imprecise) titular metaphor of (neo-)avant-garde is one of such a book design which is the result of collaboration between the publisher, the designer (who tends to have a specific, artistic vision in mind) and the author, whereas the typographic-book-binding processes turn the book into an aesthetic object and endow it with additional meanings and guide its reception. Such collection of poems remains predominantly textual, and its "contents" are still transferable to anthologies without much semantic loss. This, however, deprives such anthologies of a crucial component which affects the way it operates within the literary field. In what follows I will be applying Benjamin's category of tactility (well-known in the academic discourse), which involves expanding visual perception to include the experiences of the remaining senses, especially touch. I include tactility as a tool for interpreting books of poetry within the broader concept of "haptic aesthetics"⁵. The latter considers also organic (muscular, subcutaneous) processes (like following the working of articulatory apparatus in the case of sound poetry; the question remains if it is not the case that any avant-garde experiment with text exceeds a narrowly defined tactility⁶).

Stories

One typically distinguishes between a few types of special bookbindings: combined, spiral, integrated, Swiss/ Otabind (e.g. the "red" series of poetic translations published by Ossolineum – "Wygłosy" ["Auslauts"]) and the ones with the so-called open spine, sometimes referred to simply as open bookbinding. I will focus on the latter, although I will also discuss the spiral one. Swiss bookbinding is still relatively rare in Poland, and even when it is used, it does not always reveal the stitching I am interested in. So far I have only seen it in a few publications relevant for the poetic milieu (to name but the monumental catalogue-monograph containing all editions of the Wrocław magazine "Cegła" ["The brick"]).

Let us then begin with the origins of the fashion for experimenting with bookbinding and the spine. The first factor is, of course, the increasing financial resources of society and the publishing market, as well as technological advancement in printing. For obvious reasons, some procedures were either not possible a century before or they required prohibitive financial resources for this

⁵ Mark Paterson, „W jaki sposób dotyka nas świat»: estetyka haptyczna [„How the world touches us. Haptic aesthetics"], transl. by Michalina Kmiecik, *Ruch Literacki* 2 (2020): 181–212; Marta Smolińska, *Haptyczność poszerzona: zmysł dotyku w sztuce polskiej drugiej połowy XX i początku XXI wieku* [Extended haptics: the sense of touch in the Polish art of the second half of the 20th and beginning of the 21st c.] (Kraków: Universitas, 2020).

⁶ One more methodological issue as a footnote: I am interested in the effect of those niche, form-experimental books on the critical-literary reception, including my own. I have decided to juxtapose with one another a few copies of a given title (depending on their availability) so as not to reduce this kind of interpretation to a singular contact with the work of art (let me suspend for a moment poststructuralist discussions concerning the singularity of interpretation), to draw some intersubjective clues from the object itself and its quality. I also assume that this artistic shape is the final effect, an "ideal model" of a given book for its creator. An interesting thing happens when a book has two parallel editions: the artistic and mass-produced version; even then the critics only write about the former, "perfect" edition, or at least they take into consideration the experience of reception hypothetically/potentially triggered by that artistic version, even if they actually peruse the mass-produced copy. That is because the authorial/ publisher's gesture of addition already happened when the book was conceptualized.

game with the readers' customs to be successful. Let us focus, however, less on economic issues and more on cultural ones. Considering the not-so-distant decade, one must point to yet another fad – one for stationery and the so-called papercraft – creating notebooks or cut-outs. After 2000 that fad was developing in accordance with the development of the Internet and visibility of various journal related forms. Following the popularity of Facebook and Instagram the self-creationist and expressivist burden of the “I” was shifted from keeping a journal in the form of written records, i.e. from a narrative practice, to the appearance of that journal, its personalized nature and, not infrequently, to the craftsmanship involved in its creation, one which follows current trends in material and colour usage (e.g. upcycling or using self-made paper). At the same time, more and more online tutorials emerged, featuring keywords which one remembered from the DIY classes at school. This sphere of practices was quickly subsumed in the capitalist order or perhaps it had always been a product of changes in manners of production: personalized goods as an offer for the growing creative classes. Yet this is not the most important aspect for a critic of poetry; a change in thinking about the structure and ways of binding blocks of paper sheets revealed something previously disregarded by both publishers and everyday users of books and notebooks: the issue of stitches, stitching and binding. Gradually, even in small booklets, instead of a stapler (typical for poetry zines and saddle stitch binding), started to rely on precision stitching (red and purple threads reign supreme), which made them distinct from traditional, i.e. glued books⁷.

Over the last few years, the concept of “Japanese stitching” has become immensely popular with video tutorials, blogs and websites; especially *koki toji*; the noble stitching (there are at least two others: *yotsume toji* and *kikko toji*). This decorative manner of binding the sheets leaves the block exposed and becomes the most important visual element of the book/ notebook. The stitching is precise, geometric, producing a number of cuboids divided into rhombuses and triangles (depending on the type of stitching). Workshops devoted to this manner of notebook binding have enjoyed some popularity, becoming an element of influencers' creative activities and their ‘bookstagram’ image, dependent upon developing one's artistic and manual skills. One could argue that *koki toji* is a buzzword, not unlike *zen*, *hygge* or *kintsugi* – all of which refer to the practices of specific historical periods, but have become empty concepts, appropriated by Western societies to be applied in the contexts of self-fulfillment and self-care. Let us add that this is not a particularly complicated form of stitching. In fact, for professional designers and bookbinders it might look amateurish.

But if it is possible, or even desirable, to bind notebooks in this manner (because it is fashionable among the creative classes), why not try the same with books? Unsurprisingly, the first ones do so were artists academically affiliated with studios of graphics and books at the Academies of Fine Arts or museum curators, commissioning innovative exhibition catalogues (or simply, granting design studios lots of freedom). Not only were types of stitching, colour of threads and direction of stitching experimented with, but also, the effects of stitching and gluing were exposed, giving off a sense of rawness and the unfinished status of the book, inviting the reader to look “inside”, into the matter itself and the process of creating the object. Issues of craftsmanship, involved in the creation of

⁷ Let us list a few recent examples of important and much-debated works, which were created on the author's initiative and in close collaboration with the designer: Marcin Senddecki's *Przedmiar robót* [Bill of quantities] (Wrocław: Biuro Literackie, 2014), Sławomir Hornik's *południe pozdrawia północ* [the south sends regards to the north] (Wrocław: Fundacja na rzecz Kultury i Edukacji im. Tymoteusza Karpowicza, 2019), Natalia Malek's *Karapaks* [The carapace] (Poznań: WBPiCAK, 2020).

thus understood work of art were probably important, too. If hand-sewn notebooks with exposed spines were meant to be testament to their and their owner's exceptionality (even if they could be purchased in the biggest bookstores and stationery chain stores), a similar mechanism could also be applied to books, especially those in circulation not exceeding 100-150 copies: exhibition catalogues and minor visual projects, sold somewhere between small bookshops and museums of modern art⁸.

Perhaps one more hypothesis should be considered here. Since bookstore warehouses are wary of experimental bookbinding, if only because the open-spine solution prohibits printing the author's name and title on the spine (it is less important for poetry than for prose and for bookshelves in bookstore chains), such a book is condemned to independent distribution. It will be sold in niche bookstores, at fairs of good and beautiful books or even at fairs of artistic and craft books, like the Warsaw one or the best-known ones in New York and Los Angeles. Besides a small group of curators or alternative publishers, few can afford this manner of distribution. At the same time, there will always be those who will be attracted to this manner of publishing their niche books as wink to the reader from within the non-commercial publishing workflow: here is a book which defies its commodity function; here is literature in itself.

Practices

Meanwhile, I would like to discuss a few volumes worthy of our interest. The first type of binding I am interested in, intentionally revealing its lack of stitching, is spiral binding, which is rare in modern artistic books. An example of this type of binding is Kamil Kwidziński's *Rozłąka* [*Separation*]⁹, published by Tłocznia Wydawnicza "Ach Jo!", in collaboration with the House of Literature in Łódź (the collaboration concerned distribution rather than edition or design). By the time of publish-

⁸ An example of a Japanese binding was demonstrated in the album and the aftermath of the 2019 exhibition *Prace domowe* [Housework], from the publishing house/ collective *Dzikię Przyjemności*. *Dzikię Przyjemności*, with their specialists in spine binding are also behind one of the more unusual poetic books of recent years, i.e. Rafał Różewicz's *Podwójna ciągła* [Double white line], published by *papierwdole-Katalog Press* (2022). That book features double pamphlet stitch binding: it combines the author's two preceding books of poetry, joined by means of this conceptual stitching, the manner of opening the sheets and the idea of the direction of stitching which also marks a lifeline – like a solid line on the road, prohibiting passing. In recent times an open spine and exposed stitching became a feature of publications by *Tajfuny* – a well-known publishing house, specializing in Asian literature (the choice of binding was contextualized culturally here). Other representative examples include the publications of Łódź Film School – a black-thread binding format with an exposed spine features, e.g. in the journal of photography students "Ton" ["The Tone"]. The textbook *Trening fizyczny aktora* [An actor's physical exercises] has wiro binding (thus categorizing it as a script), whereas Jacek Rokosz's *Stracone dusze. Amerykańska eksploatacja filmowa 1929–1959* [Lost souls. American film exploitation 1929-1959] (Łódź: Wydawnictwo Biblioteki Państwowej Wyższej Szkoły Filmowej, Telewizyjnej i Teatralnej im. Leona Schillera w Łodzi, 2017) has an exposed spine. Let us add that was the first volume of the series about American exploitative cinema, the second one was *Nadzy i rozszarpani* [Naked and torn apart] (2021), but it did not feature similar typography. Exposed spine also features in the beautiful edition of critical-film-theoretical monograph *David Lynch. Polskie spojrzenia* [David Lynch. Polish perspectives] (Toruń: Centrum Sztuki Współczesnej, 2017), with its black, cardboard cover and black stitching which runs across. This choice was dictated by technical requirements: it is more difficult to bind a thick cardboard cover with the block of sheets and additional covering material is necessary. This strategy was chosen by *Warstwy* – a publishing house from Wrocław (they also do not print the titles and names on the spine). From the marketing point of view, probably the most visible solution (definitely quite unexpected one) was the popular series "Dreszczyk kulturalny" ["A cultural thrill"] from Cracow's *DodoEditor*. Three volumes of *Klas Östergren's* (2010–2012) crime stories, as well as *Roy Jacobsen's Child wonder* (2012), and *Göran Tunström's Famous men that have visited Sunne* (2015) appeared with an open spine binding first in printing houses, then on the shelves of *Tanie Książki*; they also featured huge name letters printed on glue. Perhaps it was the first time we were able to see such a bookbinding-typographic experiment on the shelves of big commercial bookstores.

⁹ Kamil Kwidziński, *Rozłąka* [*Separation*] (Tłocznia Wydawnicza „Ach Jo!”, Dom Literatury w Łodzi, 2019).



II. 2

Projekty edycji popularnej oraz limitowanej tomu Konrada Góry „Dzień został w nocy. Wiersze miłości i z nienawiści” (wydawnictwo papierwdole-Katalog Press/ Wydawnictwo Dzikie Przyjemności). Kolejno na zdjęciu: okładki obu książek, zbliżenie na okładkę i grzbiet edycji limitowanej. Projekt okładki: Dominika Łąbądz i Konrad Góra; druk, preparacja, skład ręczny: Wydawnictwo Dzikie Przyjemności [zdjęcia: JS, 2023].

ing *Rozłąka*, the author, born in 1989, had written two books of poetry and one poetry sheet. In the words of the graphic designer Maciej Kielbas, the spiral binding was Kwidzyński's own idea, and the publishing house was trying to realize that vision, despite a number of problems. This type of binding may well have indicated a perfunctory character of the book, or even its calendar-like nature, which would suggest the author's immaturity in his relationship to the passing time. It was that "boyish" unreadiness that was crucial – the creation of a maturing, manly "I", amorous and conquering, like the avant-garde poets, and similar to other *Bildungspoetries*. One reads Kwidzyński's book of poetry like one would a calendar or notebook (directions from the printing house also mention this type of binding in the context of photo albums). The coil is fastened along the shorter edge of the book (although there is also a test printout with binding along the longer edge), making it similar to a coil notebook. The cover creates the illusion of a torn page, from underneath which a fragment of the poem *Apollinaire* can be gleaned. This cover too distorts readers' habits and points to some kind of temporariness or accidentality of the book; it definitely signals its openness. It is thus the design of the book which recalls a notebook and a kind of ecstatic life-writing, reminiscent of the records of Jacek Podsiadło or Edward Stachura¹⁰, even though the poems too make reference to historical avant-garde (to mention but Apollinaire, Pablo Neruda or Generation 27). A similar type of coil binding could be applied to all books which feature an element of suddenness, note-taking and tolerance for tearing pages out – wasting poems.

Yet, I am even more interested in the over-presence of stitching than in lack thereof. Founded by Konrad Góra and Jacek Żebrowski, the publishing house papierwdole has a better brand recognition than Tłocznia "Ach Jo!". For Góra and Żebrowski (both with anarchic background) set off with their publishing project with a vision to test the "buoyancy" of a book of poetry. In his own poetic enterprises Góra has repeatedly tried to escape the codex format, e.g. in *Siła niższa (full hasiok)* [*Lesser force (full dumpster)*] (Wrocław: Fundacja na Rzecz Edukacji i Kultury im. Tymoteusza Karpowicza, 2012). The book's appearance, reminiscent of that of a newspaper, was impossible to ignore in the literary-critical reception. Here I would like to focus on two tactile works published by the celebrated duo: Konrad Góra's *Dzień został w nocy. Wiersze miłości i z nienawiści* [*The day stayed at night. Letters of love and hate*], experimenting with roughness and friction, and Paweł Stasiewicz's *Oprawa skórzana* [*Leather cover*], which plays with smoothness, ovalness and unsealing. Both books have an open spine, accompanied by a thick cardboard cover. These are limited editions, published in a few dozen copies, which are not typically sent out to jurors of poetry contests or reviewers. Yet it is these, rather than their mass edition versions (published a bit later in that same year), which delineate the interpretative horizons of the two volumes.

My sense is that the experiment with an artistic book began for papierwdole from the volume *Dzień został w nocy*¹¹, which was sold through the auction model Apart from papierwdole and Katalog Press publishing house the book also features Wydawnictwo Dzikie Przyjemności. The latter which proves to be an artistic workshop, employing a few people with anarchic, leftist roots, and founded by

¹⁰See Jakub Sajkowski, „Sezon arktyczny? Ciepło, coraz cieplej. O debiucie Kamila Kwidzyńskiego” [„Arctic season? Warm, warmer. About Kamil Kwidzyński's debut”], *Kwartalnik sZAFa* 44 (2012); Karol Maliszewski, „Idą poeci nowsi” [„Newer poets are coming”], in: *Wolność czytania* [The freedom of reading] (Mikołów: Instytut Mikołowski, 2014), 232–233; Jakub Skurtys, „Wszyscy będziemy jeszcze młodzi (Kamil Kwidzyński: *Rozłąka*)” [„We shall all be young again (Kamil Kwidzyński: *Rozłąka*)”], *ArtPapier* 373 (2018).

¹¹Konrad Góra, *Dzień został w nocy. Wiersze miłości i z nienawiści* (Ligota Mała – Dün Éideann – Wrocław: Wydawnictwo papierwdole – Katalog Press, Wydawnictwo Dzikie Przyjemności, 2021).

Dominika Łabądz and Joanna Synowiec, curators once related with Wrocław's BWA (DP is a studio, i.e. an entity focused on action and cooperation, workshops and participation of visitors, who will prepare their own bindings. In Góra's volume too we can access graphic records of the project's painstaking realization. In imprint the names of Góra and Łabądz are listed as those responsible for cover design, whereas the DP's contribution is supposed to be "print, preparation, manual assembly").

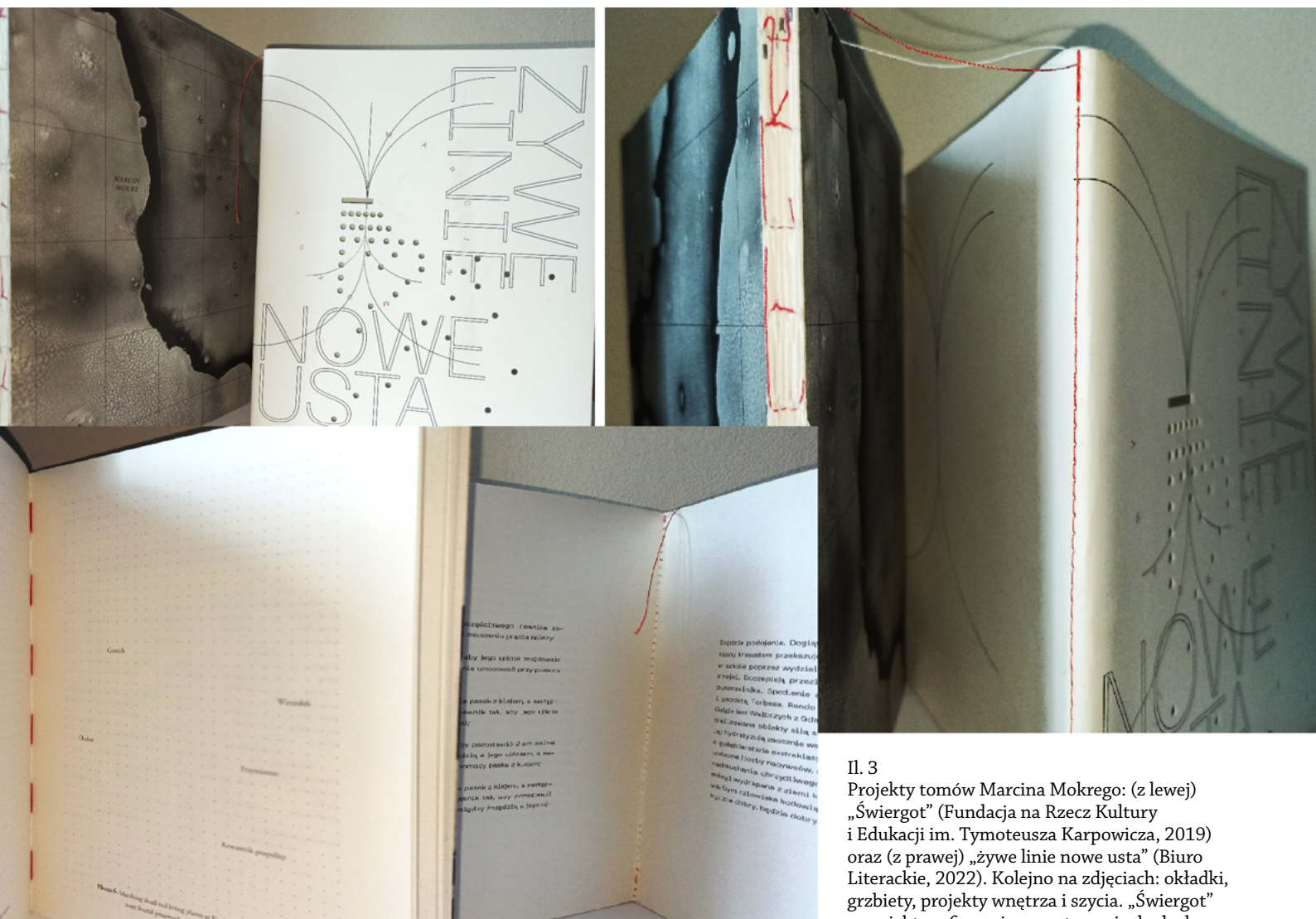
One can say that the author of *Siła niższa* thus fulfilled one of his dreams. Even against the background of other open spines and artistic books his book looks particularly shabby, carelessly glued and bound in a crooked manner, not to mention the print and paint deficits. The cover is adorned with a sandpaper veneer (of different colours and variants – depending on the copy), whereas the seam consists of a few (four) transverse white strings (it is hard to call them a thread, even when compared with the meticulous stitching on chapbooks or poetry sheets – it is more of a twine than a thread), which are rugged, covered in glue or even splitting apart. Góra's book – let us say it directly – is ugly, unaesthetic, unpleasant to the touch, and its barely visible ink is frustrating. At the same time, this pretend-carelessness is supposed to fit in what the poem has been promoting as trash, anarchic poetry, supposedly indifferent to middle-class tastes and aesthetic procedures which were applied to earlier volumes, often out of necessity¹².

Are we supposed to love or hate such a book, clashing with its cover, trying to decipher blurred letters, noticing careless gluing and the sweeping stitches? Arguably, cooperation with the *Dzikie Przyjemności* collective shifted the emphasis from the volume itself and poems within it to the process of its creation – helpless and residual (sheets of sandpaper look like they are being reused, they are sometimes dirty, frayed or fragmentary). Góra-the artist made no secret of the fact that he was interested in the materiality of the text and its becoming (his 2016 *Nie [No]* is a one-off oratory, whereas the volume itself is an inimitable score). In his poems Góra hides a number of clues about the need for a physical annihilation of the message, analogically to political acts of resistance, like historically attested cases of self-immolation. Let us quote from Kacper Bartczak's blurb, casually glued onto the fourth page of the cardboard cover:

Góra belies the claim that if language (i.e. form, ambiguity, resistance), then not the world, not the body, not love, not hatred. Here one slip of the tongue will separate for you, oh, Pole derived from various dialects, the body from its bones, it will separate you from idols, faiths and ossifications, it will expose you painfully [...].

Let us take this fragment not as advertisement (its status in poetry is dubious) but as a frag-

¹²Against the background of the lukewarm reception of the volume (usually glossing over the material aspect), one ought to highlight Alina Świeściak's essay, in which she openly calls Góra's proposition an elitist gesture (publishing 100 copies of an expensive volume and distributing it via bidding, which inflated the book's value considerably). At the same time, it plays a game with the capitalist approach to the goods and an aesthetic distinction within the bounds of the logic of gift and "temporary zones of autonomy", i.e. communities of readers, connected by the desire to possess. Considering the sociology of field and related gestures of positioning, Świeściak does not ask how the mercantile aspect of the volume in the context of reading encounters its material, object and residual character. Let us add that in this sense the "poorer", mass edition is the smoothed version, "cleared" from all the breaks and inconveniences. See Alina Świeściak, „Wokół elitaryzmu. Trzy przypadki” [„Around elitism. Three cases”], *Forum Poetyki* 28–29 (2022): 60–75; Łukasz Żurek, „I niósł, ale nie doniósł – chciał zabić, a karmił” [„He was carrying but never carried through – he wanted to kill but he was feeding”], *e-CzasKultury* 20 (2021).



Il. 3
 Projekty tomów Marcina Mokrego: (z lewej) „Świergot” (Fundacja na Rzecz Kultury i Edukacji im. Tymoteusza Karpowicza, 2019) oraz (z prawej) „żywe linie nowe usta” (Biuro Literackie, 2022). Kolejno na zdjęciach: okładki, grzbiety, projekty wnętrza i szycia. „Świergot” – projekt graficzny i przygotowanie do druku: Karolina Wiśniewska (gyyethy); „żywe linie...” – projekt okładki: Karolina Wiśniewska, projekt typograficzny: Marcin Mokry [zdjęcia: JS, 2023].

ment of a critical reception. Bartczak is a poet also searching for different ways of materializing experiences (although without resorting to tactility). The “resistance” which he is concerned with, along with the issue of linguistic form, is presented to the reader not by means of a poem but by means of the book object. It is the resistance of fingers on book pages, the resistance of the speech apparatus, of grammar, memory and reality, which will not align with the needs of the *signifié*. One might posit a claim that this intrusive, physical presence of the book keeps the reader “grounded”, reminding them that body is key to everything, and the act of reading is both traction and clashing, not only with the meanings of words.

In light of the above, another open-spine book published by papierwdole is something entirely

different. Paweł Stasiewicz's *Oprawa skórzana*¹³ was also published in 2022 in a limited edition, according to the author's own design. It was supposed to be a matrix, later utilised in the series "Pał, ponowa" ["Tracks, powder snow"], but none of the subsequent volumes in the series featured this kind of binding or "personalisation" – a ready-made template was used instead. Stasiewicz also relies on a thick, grey-and-beige cardboard for the cover, but instead of a crude veneer the title features in the right top corner as gilded, minimalist embossing. Edges of the cardboard and block have been cut and rounded, as if to prevent folding and possibly hurting the reader. The black thread stitching, etched across the spine, is often visible on different levels of the block, and is revealed on opening the volume, as if from within the blocks, from whence it runs freely.

It seems that Stasiewicz, who is predominantly a visual artist, normally working with videoart, knew exactly what kind of binding he needed for his poems and what kind of effect he wanted to achieve. What matters is not so much the typographic design within, which forces us to consider the book as concrete poetry, and, for example, directs the reader's attention to an empty corner, "the right upper corner cornucopia", in which there is nothing (p. 47), to the white space of the sheet itself, or enforces a bodily experience of the process of seeing – "with a finger in the eye", "with an eye in the lungs". It is also about the tension between the title – a leather cover – the grey cardboard of the actual cover, and the volume's subject matter: the lyrical "I's" corporeality – a skin bag with organs and secretions. The black stitching consistently "enters" the sheets: twice on a two-page spreader, which features only graphics, twice announcing and closing the whole volume, when poems adjoin each other on a white empty page: *krótkie oddychanie* [*short breath*] and *ja.gif* [*I.gif*]. The quality of this typographic project was acknowledged by all reviewers, and the volume toured various literary festivals as an award nominee.

What matters is the fact that it is difficult to imagine this physical, tactile and touchable aspect in Stasiewicz's writing – similar to burying one's finger in the eye or inserting it in a wound – without revealing the imperfections of the book itself, without the tension between a perfectly cold, embossed cardboard of the covers with the gilded sign and a carelessly executed, open book spine. It would seem that we are constantly asked how much precision the DTP – a consistently applied, constructivist aesthetics, reduced to a few geometric shapes and lines – can achieve in terms of organicity and materiality of the book itself, gluing and sewing the blocks, a manual rather than a machine-made alignment. In the background another question returns (already formulated through poems): what is the relationship of this organic, sick and dying body (flesh) to various practices of embalming, nurturing, framing and powdering? The titular leather cover does not concern the cardboard cover and – contrastingly – the exposed spine, but the skin cover and the dark fleshiness of body organs.

Is it really so? Do not the interpretative possibilities arise precisely in this contact with the materiality of the book, in its being fortified with a grey and excessively thick cardboard on the one hand, and – on the other – in the designed "opening", letting the reader go where the suture is running? Even though at the semiotic level we are dealing with tactility – controlling our eyesight, paying attention to the movement of the eyeball, with geometric analogies be-

¹³Paweł Stasiewicz, *Oprawa skórzana* (Ligota Mała – Brzeg: wydawnictwo papierwdole, K.I.T Stowarzyszenie Żywych Poetów, 2022).

tween the line and the surface, it is in the sphere of understatement, as if in the sign exterior of the book, in its metaphysical underbelly, that haptic aesthetics is operating: dark matter and the invisible work of the organs. Let us quote one poem, which directly problematizes the tension between the book seam, the textile seam and the stitching of the skin:

Wiesowi

A mi się marzą
długie bezszwowe kołdry

Żeby nie było żadnego
uciskania odleżyn
po odejściu

Żeby przy zmartwychwstaniu
nie było wszystkiego
zdrętwiałego

Żeby ta cała krew
tak stała cierpliwie
i czekała

A nie odpływała
nie wiadomo gdzie

(Bezzwowe kołdry, p. 34).

[Literal translation]

I dream of
long seamless duvets

So that there is no
pressure on the bedsores
after leaving

So that on resurrection
nothing is
numb

So that the whole blood
stands patiently
waiting

Rather than flowing away
nobody knows where

(*Bezczwowe kołdry* [*Seamless duvets*], p. 34).

We can, of course, assume that the lyrical situation would become clear even without the tactile context. We are dealing here with a monologue of a dying or sick body, which fantasizes about its own departure, reconceptualizing the inconveniences (bedsores, numbness) of the body in life into a state “on resurrection”. One problem in this grotesque, morbid poem is “the whole blood” – something from the inside, an abject, departs the subject, flowing away “nobody knows where”. This leak of contents happens because of “seams” – points of contact – here, of the duvets, but also of the bodies and skin, which is an insulating layer. From this perspective an exposed spine, which confronts us with the stitching, as well as the hard, cardboard cover play a game with “seamless duvets”, which are a fantasy about a tight, holistic departure and a possibility of return. From the sewn-up body the content will leak just the same as from an exposed book spine – as if from a ripped, insufficiently sealed book. This problematizing of the relations of inside-outside, hard-soft, membrane-wall, cover-skin, bright-dark is won not only by the number of somatems in poems but predominantly by initiating haptic associations in the very act of encountering the work.

Yet another noteworthy activity is that of Marcin Mokry, whose works originally belonged to concrete poetry. Once he became affiliated with the publishing house Fundacja na rzecz Kultury i Edukacji im. Tymoteusza Karpowicza Mokry joined forces and ideas with the graphic artist and designer of „Magazyn Materiałów Literackich Cegła”, Karolina Wiśniewska (gyyethy). Together they designed first his poem *Świergot* [*The chirping*] and then – in Biuro Literackie publishing house – the limited volume *żywe linie nowe usta* [*living lines new lips*], now described as a mockumentary about Tadeusz Peiper. I have already written elsewhere about the material properties of *Świergot*, so I will not repeat myself here¹⁴. The other of the two volumes was also broadly discussed and frequently awarded. The problem of multisensoricity and hapticity – the latter term derived from Greek *háptein* ‘bind’, ‘fasten’, ‘catch’ – was indirectly noted by Michał Trusewicz in his insightful review:

The condensed and abridged semantics of the poem circulates around the body, individuality and community. What “touches” a moment later can turn into that which “closes” in the asymmetrical relation of power. This is a particular type of concrete poetry, derived from the materiality of speaking and shouting. Mokry demonstrates an original record of different registers of hapticity: shout, incoherent semantics of mumbling and an allogical concentration of sounds. A reading of that poetry must be a hectic “performance” of these poems – the printed text is just a poor man’s version of the lyrics, on whose surface different experiences are revealed¹⁵.

On the plane of the lyrical situation the touch is divided into characters violating each other’s

¹⁴Jakub Skurtys, „że nie porozdzielani szliśmy (Marcin Mokry „Świergot”)” [„that we were walking undivided (Marcin Mokry „The Chirping”)”], *Wizje – Aktualnik* (17.11.2019), <https://magazynwizje.pl/aktualnik/skurtys-mokry/>.

¹⁵Michał Trusewicz, „Dotykani i dotknięci (Marcin Mokry, «żywe linie nowe usta»)” [„The touching ones and the touched ones”] (Marcin Mokry «żywe linie nowe usta») *Wizje – Aktualnik* (6.07.2022), <https://magazynwizje.pl/aktualnik/trusewicz-mokry/>; see also Michalina Kmiecik, „Nowe linie w żywych ustach” [„New lines in living lips”], *BiBLioteka* (2022), <https://www.biroliterackie.pl/biblioteka/recenzje/nowe-linie-w-zywych-ustach/>.

bodily inviolability (medical worker and the patient's ageing body) and the intrusiveness of sounds in the articulatory practice, in the manner of pronouncing commands and telling stories about life, which bind together words belonging to different orders. However, Trusewicz does not pay much attention to the typographic project of the book itself, even though this is where the greatest tensions between the publisher (who needs to follow market requirements) and the Mokry-Wiśniewska collective arise. The "limited" edition features at least three important meaning additions: 1) the cover is perforated, with holes, but these are arranged in what looks like a regular pattern, not discernible at first glance; 2) the book is not glued but sewn with a red stitch, which contrasts with the whiteness of the book, black font characters and letter contours, as well as the lines on the cover, but matches the redness of the author's name (who appears in the volume as his own *alter ego* – Janusz Zimny's caregiver); 3) the stitching is not cut, which means that the top and bottom of the book is marked by two pieces of thread – red on the outside, white on the inside¹⁶. These threads dangle freely, but cause unease and are an obstacle rather than an entertaining element. They are definitely useless as bookmarks – this is not their function.

Sometimes, however, they will arrange themselves in accordance with the course of the lines on the cover – of curves spreading out and converging, as if they were extensions of these lines beyond the space on the sheet and the book object itself. This is important because this meeting of curves produces the first graphic poem in the volume. Individual pieces „do”, „ty” and „my” from the words „do-ty-ka-my” ‘we touch’ / „do-my-ka-my” ‘we close’ meet for a moment, only to move apart like the threads do. Just as if the meeting spot – of a touch, a look but also of violating someone's space – can only happen in a very limited space and time – on the seam. *Żywe linie nowe usta* is not only a volume about touching but also about divergence – Janusz Zimny diverges from Tadeusz Peiper, who he thinks he is. The intentions (care, help) of the professional caregiver diverge from his actions (indifference of procedures, violence) and the articulated words diverge from their *signifié*. In the end the author's afterword also diverges from its explanatory function because it conceals more than it reveals. In that sense the thread of the seam, let loose into the space beyond the book, starts performing a similar role to Stasiewicz's seam – instead of combining and binding blocks of paper and impressions, it highlights the source hiatus, a rip.

Probably a similar reading would be applicable to a few recently published books of poetry as well. At this stage I only want to point to the existence of a potentiality of meaning, which is embedded in book design, and shifts our reception from one which involves navigating codes and signs to one which depends on introspective questions, directed also at the recipient's body and senses. Moving on to conclusions, let us try to answer the titular question: what exactly is the little thread doing? First, of course, it stitches the block of paper, i.e. it connects – that is its bookbinding function. But, as it turns out, it also cuts, materializes, eposes, extends and prolongs, marks organicity and spatiality, negotiates tactile relations or enforces a haptic reception. And sometimes it simply dangles.

¹⁶Wiśniewska applied a similar idea to Kamil Zając's *Rygor i wyobraźnia* [Rigour and imagination] (2022), the glittered pink-purple cover features loosely hanging yellow and pink threads of the binding. In that case, which seems to be congruent with the aesthetics of the entire book, the key aspects are camp interceptions with elements of a child's play.

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ABSTRACT:

The essay is devoted to a few contemporary books of poetry, whose visual aspect and realization of the typographic project encourage new interpretative hypotheses based on the manners in which the book manifests itself as an artifact rather than based on the reading of poems themselves. This shift of reception from semiotic to tactile requires a consideration of the organic and ethical aspects of communication. The present author is therefore interested in the role of stitching the blocks and types of bookbinding, especially the aesthetics of an open spine, which provides the books with new meanings.

haptic esthetics

TACTILITY

MODERN POETRY

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Poetry as mixed media: Darek Foks's *Eurydyka* [Eurydice]

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The relationship between text and images in Darek Foks's poetry may be analyzed from many different perspectives, but one thing is certain: he is one of the most prolific Polish multi-modal writers. Foks is interested in and creates literature which functions outside traditional media in an intramedia environment. Of course, his works may be read like traditional literature. Foks rarely uses two codes/ media at the material and visual level. However, even when he employs one writing system visually, he forces the reader/viewer to see literature in the expanded field.¹ Indeed, as W.J.T. Mitchell argued that "[t]he image/text problem is not just something constructed 'between' the arts, the media, or different forms of representation, but an unavoidable issue *within* the individual arts and media. In short, all arts are 'composite' arts (both text and image); all media are mixed media (...)."² In Foks's poetry we always find the arts (plural). His poems operate in a broad contextual field and construct photographs and films. Considering the above perspective of poetry as mixed media, in the present article I shall examine the photobook *Eurydyka* [Eurydice] (2021).

¹ This is, of course, a reference to Rosalind E. Krauss's phrase "sculpture in the expanded field". See: *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Mass. MIT Press: 1986), 276–290.

² William John Thomas Mitchell, "Beyond Comparison: Picture, Text, and Method", in *idem: Picture Theory. Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 94–95.

Exposition

Darek Foks does not publish photobooks often. His first photobook was *Co robi łączniczka* [What Does the Female Liaison Officer Do?]. *Eurydyka* is his second photobook, although in *Historia kina polskiego* [The History of Polish Cinema] we may also find photographs taken by the author – they play a role in the story. However, Foks assigned such an important role to photographs only in his two books, and *Eurydyka* is special in this respect, because the photographs were taken by the poet. While they play a very important role in the narrative, they also distract one from reading through the sheer pleasure of looking.

Foks's photobook refers to – characteristically for him – complex fields of contexts, including film, painting, and literature. Employing multi-layered allusions, abbreviations, and repetitions, it resists immobility because it works with transposition, translocation, and transfiguration. A plot may be found between the lines, although the author does not seem to particularly care about connections – sometimes, unexpectedly, a single thread may be found in a series of poems and sometimes it simply disappears. Some parts are particularly loaded with meaning. These are longer repetitive and narrative sequences: *Wiersz o malarstwie* [A Poem on Painting], *Eurydyka* [Eurydice], *Wymiana i dar* [Exchange and Gift], and *Kwadrans z Heglem* [Fifteen Minutes with Hegel]. Foks's poems often rely on political narratives; they render abstract concepts more concrete by transforming them into patterns borrowed from other fields, most often warfare. However, the poems are quite diverse. They feature leading characters: more than one person speaks, sometimes they talk to us, and sometimes they intimately address someone else. The rhythm, meter, and lengths of the poems vary: some are just single lines and others extend over multiple pages. The addressed topics also vary. Some poems are narrative and anecdotal (they often allude to Polish political life). Some poems are minimalist (one person declares their love to another). Others talk about spending time in hotels in Prague. One is an extensive poem about love – *Eurydyka*.³

This complex figure of *Eurydyka* means that certain images, scenes, and sentences transform into disturbing allegories, and many details, motifs, and variants seem to be interconnected in the suggestive architecture of Foks's book. The world both makes sense and falls apart. If it were not for the cover, it would be more difficult to find the compositional principle: “This book was born and grew up in Prague, where I spent a few months as part of the Visegrad Literary Residency Program in 2015 [...]”⁴ However, the nature of the text remains a mystery: we do not know whether we are on a film set or whether we are reading a constantly updated script (influenced by the author's actions), or whether we are dealing with a still different instance of truth and fiction intertwining. *Eurydyka*, distributed over many planes and media, encompassing film, photographs, and text, clearly shows that Foks has for years been experimenting with new concepts and new formats of the book. The book becomes an extremely complex object, a choreographed arrangement of text, writing, and photographs – writing in

³ Oskar Meller comments on *Eurydyka* in detail in “Przechwycić porządek pożądania” [To Intercept the Order of Desire], *Notatnik Literacki* 1 (2023) <https://notatnikliteracki.pl/teoria/przechwycic-porzadek-pozadania-2/>, date of access 25 Aug. 2023.

⁴ Darek Foks, *Eurydyka* [Eurydice] (Wrocław: Wrocławskie Wydawnictwo Warstwy, 2021), 4. Subsequent quotations are referenced directly in the text.

photographs, mirrors in photographs, photographs in photographs – which transgresses its front and back covers.

The arrangement of poems and photographs suggests that they have something in common. Additionally, the title of each photograph is the title of a movie. *Eurydyka* [Eurydice] is made of poems, photographs, and film titles, organized on a timeline (starting with winter and ending with autumn and an additional off-season poem, *Wyciemnienie* [Darkening]). There does not seem to be a single rule/model governing the connections between photographs, film titles, and poems. I am not sure if there are any predetermined rules at all that govern the order in which photographs, poems, and titles appear. Looking for similarities, additions, and supplements to poems through photographs will prove unsuccessful. Foks provides film titles that traditionally and conventionally refer to photographs but none of the photographs are shots indicated in the title.

Let us try to find our way through this excess and ask why Foks needs multimodality. To talk about looking, desire, love, and time travel? To talk about a fascination with film, faces of actresses, women's bodies, and nudity? It is believed that nudity determines the emotional depth of the image – so we have to ask: is it an object of desire, mockery, or a critical reinterpretation of the patriarchal gaze (an insight into macho culture) or something else? Such questions point to the three levels of *Eurydyka*: the concept and structure of the photobook, the concept of photography as a (unique and at the same time mass) medium, and visual representations of women.

Other traditions of the photobook

Eurydyka is a photobook. However, Foks seems to have ignored the tradition and history of this work of art, which dates back to William Henry Fox Talbot's *The Pencil of Nature* (1844–1846). If we agree that the origins of this form lie in the interdependent relationship between the verbal and the visual, with the dominant role of the semiotic order, it becomes clear that *Eurydyka* challenges such a tradition. The photographs are not dependent on the verbal. The respective media do not illuminate one another but follow their own paths, suspended in the history of bodies searching for other bodies.

However, the rich tradition to which Foks refers is visible in the extensive contexts. Eurydice is not only a mythological character, an Orphic fantasy, but above all a reference to the lyrics of a song which appeared at the beginning and the finale of Jerzy Skolimowski's 1965 movie *The Saragossa Manuscript*: "Eurydice, do not wait for me, I'm slowly forgetting you. / Eurydice, life breaks us, it never starts again / Eurydice, where can I find you, / my heart is overcome with grief / Eurydice, do not wait for me, / I do not even want to know if you're dead." The list of film and photographic inspirations can go on and on. They are convoluted yet numerous and it is impossible to list all of them. For example, Victor Burgin's *Fiction Film*, based on André Breton's 1928 book *Nadja*, illuminates *Eurydyka*. In connection with *Nadja*, Breton asked: "and when will all the books that are worth anything stop being illustrated with drawings and

appear only with photographs?”⁵ Foks’s idea, paired with Skolimowski’s film and interpreted as yet another variation on the theme of the journey and encounters with women, refers to the visual level of *Fiction Film*. Burgin thus commented on photographs which imaginatively documented a lost film supposedly directed by Breton:

We may reconstruct the lost film of André Breton’s *Nadja* only in imagination, in the interstices of all that now remains of it: isolated frames from rejected laps dissolves, perhaps gathered by some infatuated assistant editor from the cutting-room floor, and which are themselves fictions.⁶

In his project, Burgin recreates something which never happened: although the novel is based on Breton’s autobiographical love story, it was not adapted into a movie. The photographs that Burgin shows imitate the black and white frames of the imagined film: formal mimicry creates the atmosphere of a tragic love story. One of the photographs shows it literally: a huge female face is towering over a burning flipped car.

Stories conveyed in the poems engage in a dialogue with stories introduced by movie titles and mottos from novels, including Andrzej Strug’s *Dzieje jednego pocisku* [The Story of One Bullet] and Don DeLillo’s *Point Omega*. The first quote reads: “Do you want to die? I want to live and I want to die!” and it later appears as a photograph titled *Only Lovers Left Alive*, a movie directed by Jim Jarmusch. An entire page is shown, two sentences from which were quoted in the motto. Next to the book in the photograph we can see used condoms and other items which refer to a “love” story. The quote from DeLillo’s novel reads: “What else? A simple head shot.” *Point Omega* opens with a description of a 24-hour screening of the movie *Psycho*, projected in slow motion by Douglas Gordon.

Photographs of hotels and cities also evoke vague contexts. They make us think of Sophie Calle’s conceptual books, especially her 1983 book *Suite Vénitienne*. Calle explores what it feels like to follow a stranger met at a party. It is a highly eurydical book, insofar as it focuses on following, looking, tracing. This theme is not as obvious in Foks’s book, but this context renders it more powerful.⁷

What is the meaning of this transcending movement, this act of going beyond the cover, comparable, in my opinion, to breaking out of the frame of a painting? Embodied perception is constantly disembodied. We react to images in and through our bodies, but we are forced to mentally detach from them. Our attention is repeatedly diverted from the “inside” of the book to the “outer” world – movie titles, people in the photographs, and contexts of the staged photographs work like links. It seems that the media (photography, film) take us beyond the book: in order to read it and view it, we are constantly looking beyond its covers. We are constantly being ousted out of the book – we are looking for plots signaled by film titles – and beyond the page – the photographs play with repetitions and ruptures. As such, *Eurydyka* is a combination of negations. It is an object that cannot be read and cannot be viewed.

⁵ See: Krauss, 98.

⁶ See: Victor Burgin, *Fiction Film*, <https://collections.lacma.org/node/173259>.

⁷ See : Sophie Calle, *Suite Vénitienne* (Los Angeles: Siglio, 2015).

Simulation without seduction

In “On the Invention of the Photographic Meaning,” Allan Sekula writes about two 19th-century photographic discourses. The first one, represented by *Camera Work*, postulates that photography is a unique work of art, a fetish, an affective power. In the second discourse, rooted in empiricism, photography is seen as a document. Its most fundamental feature is reproducibility. Thus, photographic meaning circulates between two radically different approaches: the photograph is either a precious and unique artifact or a mass and easily accessible object.⁸ Sekula is not the only one to point to this ambivalent status of photography, adding that “[t]he invention of the photograph as high art was only possible through its transformation into an abstract fetish [...]”⁹ At the turn of the 1970s and 1980s, artists also transcended photographic meanings suspended between an abstract fetish and a commercial product:

This problematizing operated on several fronts: on one side they were opposed to art photography that assumed the values of the unique image associated with painting; on another side they were suspicious of media photography that worked that worked to produce effects of consensus in the news and of persuasion in advertising. [...] These postmodernists treated the photograph not only as a “serial” image, a multiple without an original print, but also as a “simulacral” image, a representation without a guaranteed referent in the world.¹⁰

Such an understanding of photography is shared by Foks. He works in series and distributes similarities and other types of codes between them. He also simulatively triumphs over referential effects: the face of the woman we see in the photograph titled *The Dark Passage* (p. 213) is a montage of four other faces that we already know from the screen shown on the previous page, titled *The Fifth Element*, like a movie by Luc Besson (p. 211). The face of the woman from *The Dark Passage* is therefore a symbiosis of the faces of other actresses. She has, for example, Kate Winslet’s nose, and becomes, by default, the titular Eurydice. She is a face and a fetish emerging from the deep black background.

Indeed, such simulative – although today, to avoid using postmodern terms from the turn of the 1970s and 1980s, we would say performative – effects are created when Foks writes about the film set of *Die Panzerschlacht bei Prochorowka*, to which “Susanne from Brno dragged him.” *Die Panzerschlacht bei Prochorowka* is an “experimental movie by Gudrun Reckhaus.” It adds to the fictional contexts of narrative photographs; for example, it helps explain why women’s bodies are shown in a military context. Indeed, we can see a woman in a gas mask, a female breast with a tattoo of a crowned eagle, a naked female torso and a plane. There are more such overt simulations. In some other photograph, we can see Darek Foks walking with Kate Winslet against the background of a block of flats (p. 39). Then, this photograph becomes a film still: we are in a movie theater and the audience is watching Foks and Winslet walking down the street (p. 41). The narrative threads form an even more intricate pattern when we

⁸ See: Allan Sekula, “On the Invention of the Photographic Meaning,” *Artforum* 13.5 (January 1975), <https://www.artforum.com/features/on-the-invention-of-photographic-meaning-212642/>, date of access 8 Jul. 2024.

⁹ Sekula.

¹⁰ *Art Since 1900: Modernism · Antimodernism · Postmodernism*, ed. Hal Foster et al. (London: Thames and Hudson, 2004), 586.



II.1

refer to the two poems which accompany the photographs: *Wiersz dla Kate Winslet* [A Poem for Kate Winslet] and *Drugi wiersz dla Kate Winslet* [A Second Poem for Kate Winslet]. Both refer to dreams, the film set of Michelangelo Antonioni's *Eclipse*, and Antonioni's absence. *The Eclipse* is not so much where Foks and Winslet meet but rather the title of the corresponding photograph in which we see a classic scene from a psychoanalytic session: a woman is lying on a couch and someone is sitting next to her with their hands in their pockets. The photograph is accompanied by the text: "Where's your husband? He's fucking someone's wife" (p. 42).

Seriality and simulation – which rely on the avant-garde montage and the pleasure derived from the possibility of transforming and creating geographically and historically improbable events, situations, and meetings – are the most important features of these photographs. Perhaps the most spectacular expression of this relationship is the meeting between Gloria Grahame, who is watching Munk's *Pasażerka* [Passenger] (the still shows Aleksandra Ślaska as a camp supervisor) in an erotic pose, and Darek Foks, who is sitting next to the actress and

looking at a computer screen over her naked shoulder. A tall microphone stand may be seen above. The photograph is titled *Paths of Glory*. This is the most – so to speak – complete photograph in the series: the scene documenting this fictitious meeting is created slowly, in the subsequent photographs. The first is the photograph of the speaker stand. It is the most abstract image among the photographs in *Eurydyka* which show things. Titled *The Conversation* (p. 11), it shows the stand almost suspended in a vacuum, as if cutting into the black background. It is not a conventional representation of an object. On page 51, there is a photograph of the actress Gloria Grahame watching Aleksandra Śląska in *Pasażerka* (titled *Scent of a Woman*). On page 113, Foks shows himself staring at a screen – the darkness swallows almost every-



II.2

thing. His face is a bright circle, but the body is consumed by blackness. The photograph on page 191 is the most detailed one: the above-described arrangement is repeated, and two new elements are added, a computer screen and Foks looking over Grahame's shoulder. The meeting of Foks and Grahame is also documented in the photograph on page 233, titled *The Wild Bunch*. Foks is lighting Graham's cigarette. They are standing under the poster advertising *Man on a Tightrope*, which fits halfway into the frame, showing the legs of a woman sitting in a car. As a result, simulation is combined with the fetishization of bodies – legs, faces, lips, and hands – which stand out from the dark background. We come close to a total objectification of bodies. They almost, and the emphasis is on almost, become abstract fetishes. Even though most photographs of women's bodies focus our attention on details – breasts, wombs, crotches, buttocks, faces, lips – as they emerge from the black background, as if they were drifting outside time and context, it would be difficult to talk about their seductive or sensual power. This, of course, matters when it comes to the ideological character of these photographs. I will return to this point later.

We should also look at these photographs through the prism of their ostentatiously non-aesthetic effects. All of them – regardless of whether they depict apartment interiors, everyday objects, urban landscapes, or human bodies – are blurred, black and white, and grainy. Figures/characters can hardly be distinguished from the black background, remaining as if on the brink of readability and visibility. This black page, the black background of photographs and montages, may seem to be a distant equivalent of Dadaist white pages analyzed by Rosalind E. Krauss. The scholar compared how Cubists, Dadaists and Surrealists used white pages in their collages, arguing that dada montage gives a very strong impression of gaps, cuts, spaces – the white page serves as a matrix, thanks to which individual isolated elements of the represented reality are clearly visible:

The white page is not the opaque surface of cubist collage, asserting the formal and material unity of the visual support; the white page is rather the fluid matrix within which each representation of reality is secured in isolation, held within a condition of exteriority, of syntax, of spacing.¹¹

These gaps, spaces, and cuts destroy the effect of the real: the reality of the montage cannot in any case constitute photographic evidence, as the supposed transparency of the photographic image is usually read. It is immediately clear that, as Krauss writes, “we are not looking at reality, but at the world infested by interpretation or signification, which is to say, reality distended by the gaps or blanks which are the formal preconditions of the sign.”¹² Surrealist montage, on the other hand, does not work with the white page but instead relies mostly on doubling: “Through duplication, it opens the original to the effect of difference, of deferral, of one-thing-after-another, or within another: of multiples burgeoning within the same.”¹³

If we take into account the traditions of the montage – be it cubist, dadaist, or surrealist, which defined the aesthetics of the 1920s and which were later incorporated into the neo-avant-

¹¹Krauss, 106-107.

¹²Krauss, 107.

¹³Krauss, 109.

garde aesthetics of photography, as exemplified by Robert Rauschenberg and Andy Warhol¹⁴ – then Foks seems to propose various variants (levels) of readability of his black pages. They establish characters and things in unity, as a materially coherent reality that – unlike in the montages semiotically interpreted by Krauss – does not refer us to signs, interpretations, or representations. On the contrary: although we know that the source of photographs is never the real presence of the actresses but only their photographic representations, the blackness from which they emerge isolates them from their lived realities and gives them not so much new meanings but a new temporality, within which the traditional distinctions between fiction and document, presence and sign, do not matter. The work of imagination and memory that brings “real” fictions into existence seems to be more important.

However, the bright, radiant figures are neither astral nor disembodied. On the contrary, the black background transforms the abstract experience of the image into bodily sensations and memory impressions. Perhaps it does not matter whether the photographic background is black or white. According to Ludwig Wittgenstein, black and white are opaque, material colors – they are not simply color fields. Black additionally gives forms depth and three-dimensionality.¹⁵ Wittgenstein further refers to “matt” and “luminosity” in his discussion of the color black:

Black takes away the luminosity of a colour. [...] Black is the darkest of the colours. We say “deep black” but not “deep white.” [...] The difference between black and, say, a dark violet is similar to the difference between the sound of a bass-drum and the sound of a kettle-drum. We say of the former that it is a noise not a tone. It is matt and absolutely black.¹⁶

White renders forms flat. “If all colours became whitish, the picture would lose more and more depth.”¹⁷ In *Eurydyka*, black also refers to Skolimowski’s black and white movie. But above all, it both adds depth and three-dimensionality to corporeality and transports the body beyond the somatic sphere. Foks needs the black photographic background to tell his love story, to tell the story of erotic explorations. What emerges is the “luminous” surface of a bodily form – not a body, not a representation – but a materiality that can be made visible in an artistic medium using points, lines, colors, and tone. At the same time, however, due to the relationship between matter and the illusion of a non-flat surface, we see these forms as bodies that are constantly in danger of disappearing into the background. The photograph is both a system of visual signs (fields, colors, lines, tones) and an image of a body mediated by means of various aesthetic regimes. Language/text also adds to this duality of representation; this is a different issue, but it is worth emphasizing it now. Even if we agree that language is not necessary in reading/seeing photographs, we should acknowledge that the aesthetic planes of texts and photographs come together to convey an anti-idealistic message. If Foks’s poems draw on sentimental literary patterns, these patterns are always “challenged” by references from completely different stylistic fields and the principles of repetition and seriality, i.e.

¹⁴See: *Art Since 1900*, 591.

¹⁵See: Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on colour*, trans. Linda L. McAlister, Margarete Schättle (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 2007), 110.

¹⁶Wittgenstein, 80.

¹⁷Wittgenstein, 94.

they are composed like photographs: “Mówię, że cała ta miłość / to dolina brzmiaça / moim lamentem, rzeka, / co zaraz wyleje, dzikie / zwierzę, stado ptaków, / srebrna ryba w potoku, myśl, co się wnosi, / zalesione wzgórze, ścieżka / donikąd, kształty / we wspomnieniach, serce / zdrętwiałe, najczystsze / powietrze, ład, morze, / twarze, stopy, ramiona, / bujny gąszcz włosów, / tu i tam domostwo, / wzrok czysty i tkliwy, / opowieść o niczym, / która dziś coś znaczy, / oraz cała reszta w moich białych majtkach, / a on liże mnie trochę / chaotycznie z nadzieją, / że moja cipa rychło / odpowie na te zaczepki” [I say that all this love / is a valley resounding / with my lament, a river / that is about to flood, a wild / animal, a flock of birds, / a silver fish in a stream, an elevated thought, / forested hills, a path / to nowhere, shapes / in memories, a numb / heart, purest / air, land, sea, / faces, feet, arms, / thick lush hair, / here and there a house, / clear and tender eyes, / a story about nothing, / that means something today, / and everything else in my white panties, / and he licks me a little / chaotically, hoping / that my pussy will soon / respond] (*Eurydyka*, p. 156). Texts, photographs, and the plots of movies which exist only as titles do not function as separate media but – as in the case of the translation of spatial sculpture into a drawing, as described by Krauss – they correspond to different levels of readability.¹⁸

It seems that understanding the relationship between the metaphorical nature of Eurydice and Foks’s experiments with photography is of fundamental importance for this project. Photography and the female figure of the lost lover complement one another: Eurydice is both an abstract fetish – precious and unattainable – and a figure made available in many narratives which circulates between times and worlds – she may be used quickly, like advertising or propaganda photography. Foks tries to find escape routes from these stories and narratives both for photography and for his female protagonist: he reproduces photographs devoid of the aesthetic values of a unique work of art, trivializes and at the same time brutalizes the image, distances himself from the high ambitions of photography, and at the same time experiments with documentation practices. He shows us photographs of Prague and Brno, of urban and residential spaces, documenting the comings and goings of different characters. Respectively, many of those encounters never actually took place. Like Victor Burgin’s *Fiction Film*, they are suspended between the abstraction of dreams and the materiality of the medium, color, and montage cuts.

Nudity: Composing a scene for the viewer

Let me say something more about photographs of naked female bodies. This is the most controversial part of Darek Foks’s project.

In the late 1970s, we stopped treating photographs as an expression of the author’s originality or intentions and realized that the meaning of the image stabilizes in relation to other images or signs. Photographs of naked bodies were considered intimate photographs. It appears to no longer be true. In *Eurydyka*, visual contrasts between real objects (motifs) and implicitly sexual images of women’s bodies are not based on intimacy. Visual references and

¹⁸Krauss, 124.



II.3

experiments with repetition (seriality) point towards an impersonal message and not towards spatial, temporal, and emotional relationships.

In fact, Foks creates the filmic, photographic, and textual identity of Eurydice. However, this process is more complex than in colonial or patriarchal orders – where “she should be a sign, and he – the holder of meanings”¹⁹ – because in the love poem *Eurydyka* it is the woman who talks to the man about her desire and sexuality. The man is also photographed, although it is always the fully dressed Darek Foks. Moreover, the gaze directed at women’s bodies is reflected thanks to mirrors, which of course changes the relationship between the viewer and the photographed object: we are looking at someone who is looking at themselves in a mirror or posing in front of a camera. Most images of women (nudes) are representative of what Mi-

¹⁹Anna Wiczorkiewicz, *Czarna kobieta na białym tle. Dyptyk biograficzny* [Black woman on white background: A biographical diptych] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Universitas, 2013), 28.

chael Fried calls the absorbent mode – the person in the photograph appears not to be aware of the fact that they are being photographed.²⁰

The photograph on page 129 is a good example. A woman is putting on stockings. Absolutely concentrated on this activity, she is sitting on the edge of a bed. A camera captures her from the side. Her breasts, thighs, neck, hands and face are exposed, luminous. A computer screen emerges from the dark background, with a photograph of a different woman. It can be considered a metaphor for the viewer: the woman on the computer screen is looking at the woman getting dressed. Likewise on page 13, we can see a woman's face, doubled, through some kind of an opening/window and as partially obscured by a telephone. The photograph of a masturbating woman, whom we see in a mirror, resists dominant beauty standards and – like most photographs showing women in the absorbent mode – emphasizes the self-referential and autoerotic potential of the visual, linguistic, and bodily medium. Autoeroticism and self-referentiality interact, and thus an understanding is established between the media, thanks to which Foks takes us to where we expect intimacy to appear. Of course, not all photographs show the processes of being exposed to the gaze in/through mediations in the absorbent mode. There are many photographs in which women look straight into the camera, as if addressing us and transcending the closed system of looks. These differences in the modes of presenting objects are also responsible for differences in the ways in which photographs are perceived. And most importantly – the dynamics of reception is not conditioned by texts; Foks's photographs are narrative, as defined by Marianna Michałowska.²¹ Meaning offered/created by linguistic commentary is superfluous. The photographs' aesthetic, political, and ideological implications adjust in relation to one another, adapting to stories and images about all kinds of pleasures.

Therefore, *Eurudyka* is not a story which reveals male psychosexual fears, as the story of Orpheus and his attempts to bring Eurydice back might be interpreted. In fact, the Orphic tradition is not prominent in the book. The two attributes most often criticized in patriarchal culture – voice/language/speech and the gaze – are not only reclaimed by female characters but also greatly complicate the relationships between the figures associated with them. The doubling of the gaze (women in the photographs look at themselves and at other women) creates a continuous voyeuristic spectacle. It is difficult to say who has control over bodies, desires, and signs. We are all part of this spectacle, and Foks's story cannot be told without the risk of ideological dilemmas: a look, a shot, or a naked body (part) will always be suspicious. Just as giving a voice to a female character may be suspicious – an interpretation which focuses on an extremely instrumental treatment of women may also be justified.

But Foks is not interested in presenting multiple perspectives and different points of view. He does not wish to prove that various (historical) contexts determine the political and ideological meanings of (naked) bodies, agency, power, and language. Foks guides us through images and texts, multiplying ideological and cognitive controversies. He does not want to use

²⁰Michael Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008).

²¹Marianna Michałowska, *Foto-teksty. Związki fotografii z narracją* [Photo-texts. Relationships between photography and narrative] (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 2012).

linguistic and visual media in a safe manner. He shows the body in a risky way, accepting the fact that he may be accused of sexism: body parts he shows function as signs of the objectification of the female body – they are burdened with their own cultural meanings. Can we read these photographs as liberating? Or at least as resisting an interpretation in which the body is a precious commodity?

Perhaps the key to understanding such resistance is to notice the refusal of the photographed women to satisfy aesthetic criteria. They do not have ideal, slim, harmonious bodies. If we bear in mind that in the poem *Eurydyka* some lines (which do not form a refrain) refer to female sexual pleasure and desire, described literally, we could conclude that Foks thus transcends and challenges traditional contexts of female nudity. Moreover: in the ancient tradition, the story of Eurydice ends tragically. Focused on fear, loss, and the horror of death, the story does not talk about women's desires. In Foks's *Eurydyka* – even if the poet does not talk about photography and does not show the body from the point of view of the photographed object but instead multiplies mirror reflections and introduces other media of perception – the story of Eurydice is ultimately a story of pleasure. It is an accumulation of shameless nudity that is not degrading or harmful. Foks removed the signs of violence, fear, and shame from all media – photography, language, and the body. Naturally, only to such a degree as it is possible in a message/object that still functions in patriarchal capitalism.

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KEYWORDS

medium

photographs

PHOTOBOOK

ABSTRACT:

The article “Poetry as mixed media: Darek Foks’s *Eurydyka* [Eurydice]” discusses a unique multimodal nature of Darek Foks’s photobook *Eurydyka*. Focusing on three issues – the tradition of the photobook, an understanding of photography, and the aesthetics of representing the female body – the author argues that the three media that constitute the book (text, photographs and, implicitly, film) should not be construed as separate orders of meaning but as different levels of readability and visibility.

collage

NUDITY

seriality

SYMULATIONS

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“Allegro for a prepared computer and a dynamized harpsichord”

– Andrzej Falkiewicz’s

Ledwie mrok [Hardly darkness]

as a prototypical proto-hypertext

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Ledwie mrok – a failed novel

First published in 1998, Andrzej Falkiewicz’s *Ledwie mrok* is no doubt an exceptional text by the theatrologist, critic and essayist. This is exceptionality well expressed in Andrzej Skrenda’s claim that “*Ledwie mrok* is best described as a writer’s failure, albeit a very ambitious one, and a work which can be interpreted as Falkiewicz’s *opus magnum*”¹. But how can something be simultaneously an *opus magnum* and a failure? Perhaps *Ledwie mrok* proves that these two categories of critical evaluation are not mutually exclusive, especially if we assume that the failure is intentional and pre-planned. A possible clue can be discovered in the novel’s plot, with its fragmentary structure and ambiguous status of the majority of events. The story is of a debuting actress (?) or athlete (?), who breaks both legs in an accident and after recovery (?) decides to perform (?) her disability, which

¹ Andrzej Skrendo, „Stanisław Brzozowski i Andrzej Falkiewicz — fragmenty o powinowactwie” [Stanisław Brzozowski and Andrzej Falkiewicz – fragments on affinity], in: Stanisław Brzozowski – (ko)repetycje Stanisław Brzozowski – (co)repetitions], ed. by Tomasz Mizerkiewicz, Andrzej Skrendo, Krzysztof Uniłowski (Katowice: FA-art, 2013), 310.

leads to another accident, depriving her of powers in both legs and a hand. This becomes a pretext for a philosophical-artistic description of her experiences of "handicap" in correspondence with an undefined mentor (critic? priest? manager? doctor? novel writer?). There are more question marks than facts in the story. The way in which events are presented in sixty-five numbered fragments increases chaos, instead of imposing order. The protagonists themselves are lost in chronology and even when they try to determine what is factual (e.g. the resume from chapter 23), the experimental nature of the fragments, their internal incoherence and incompatibility with other fragments, which only seemingly pertain to similar issues, only reinforce the recipient's sense of confusion.

The majority of interpretations so far have seen the causes of Falkiewicz's failure in his attempts at creating "a language of the body". Thus, Anna Gębala interprets *Ledwie mrok* as a story of a woman who is "searching for the possibility of expressing the inexpressible"², and "freeing her own speech from the discursive regime [is] one of the most important tasks for writing with one's body"³. Joanna Orska, in turn, points out that "the language of the body, of its warmth, scent and the record in which the body can be heard come together in what is outwardly and whose outwardness remains dubious"⁴. Karol Maliszewski claims that Falkiewicz would like to "demonstrate how language, under the circumstances considered here, becomes helpless and freezes in one's mouth, i.e. in conventions. Its formalized rationality is broken by other means of expression, which improvise around something I dare call «somatic communication»"⁵.

Of course, all these proposals help us notice unobvious relations, entered by the text and the body, especially that the mentor describes the woman's letters as a tumbleweed of "body fragments and plastic, covered in lichen ([sic!] letters)"⁶ or "her own records (of pre-body, post-word...)" (LM 238), frequently pointing to links between *soma* and *sema*. Nonetheless, here I would like to propose a different interpretation of Falkiewicz's failure. After all, *Ledwie mrok* is an epistolary novel – it is a text about communication. However, as pointed out by Krzysztof Uniłowski, "a convention which implies mutual understanding, a deep connection between partners, shared honesty is falling apart in Falkiewicz's work"⁷, which is "so striking that it verges on the ridiculous"⁸. This remark is poignant because the inability to establish any relationship between the correspondents is one of the novel's recurring themes. The mentor complains that the letters he received "can only be called «letters» by virtue of being put in an envelope and put in a mailbox (even though they don't lack a lot to be full-fledged letters... Just a little bit more attention paid to the addressee, like asking him how he spent his summer holidays or if he has a wife and children, how he is feeling today or what he is doing" (LM 237).

² Anna Gębala, „Homo sacer, czyli przeciw homogeniczności. Uwagi o «Ledwie mroku» Andrzeja Falkiewicza” [„Homo sacer, or against homogeneity. Remarks on Andrzej Falkiewicz's *Ledwie mrok*], in: „Nie przeczytane”. Studia o twórczości Andrzeja Falkiewicza” [„Not read”. Studies on the works of Andrzej Falkiewicz], ed. by Jarosław Borowiec, Tomasz Mizerkiewicz (Wrocław: ATUT, 2014), 143.

³ Gębala, 141.

⁴ Joanna Orska, „Ma petite Artaud; gry językowe / gry teatralne”, [Ma petite Artaud; language games/ theatre games] in: Nie przeczytane 89.

⁵ Karol Maliszewski, „O «rozpiętości wyrazowej człowieka» – «Ledwie mrok» Andrzeja Falkiewicza” [„On «people's lexical range» – «Ledwie mrok» by Andrzej Falkiewicz], in: „Nie przeczytane”, 134.

⁶ Andrzej Falkiewicz, *Ledwie mrok* (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Dolnośląskie, 1998), 505. Henceforth, LM, followed by page number.

⁷ Krzysztof Uniłowski, „Intymność niemożliwa” [„An impossible intimacy”], *Teksty Drugie* 1-2 (2007): 237.

⁸ Uniłowski, „Intymność niemożliwa”, 237.

Perhaps then *Ledwie mrok* ought to be read as evidence of the failure of communication between the mentor and the disabled woman? Indeed, their miscommunication is not only a result of their inability to engage in a closer relationship, but it also stems from technical issues. The first occurrence of the word “letter” can be found in the sentence “You probably confused the letters” (LM 56), which suggests that the correspondence is initiated by mistake and maintained by means of attached messages: on cassettes, video and floppy discs. One might assume that that intense exchange of multimedia attachments was planned by Falkiewicz quite early on in his work on the text⁹ but that is not the only reason for its importance. The fact that all attachments which reach the recipient are garbled seems poignant for analysing this communicative failure. The cassette’s spools are “simply empty, colourless” or “unfortunately [...] broken. I was so emphatic about not sending the letters by post. I asked that you give the letters to an intermediary, someone who is, as far as possible, reliable” (LM 198). In the audio recording “the added buzz of the electric fan made it impossible [...] to replay her words!” (LM 238). Even though all these examples of technical difficulties call for an independent analysis, here I will only focus on one of them – the one related to the working of the computer.

In his *Ta chwila* [*That moment*] Falkiewicz refers to *Ledwie mrok* as “an allegro for a prepared computer and a dynamized harpsichord”¹⁰, resorting to a doubly impossible formula. Even though the paradoxical nature of the second part appears to be obvious (it is a characteristic feature of harpsichord that it cannot differentiate dynamically), the first paradox is more cryptic. It seems to me that the prepared computer turns *Ledwie mrok* simultaneously into the writer’s failure and his *opus magnum*. Since Falkiewicz’s novel ends on a bugged floppy disk, which dismantles the entire text, let us begin the analysis of the operation of a prepared computer from a story of a certain CD-ROM.

Ledwie mrok - the novel as an anachronistic remediation

In the repositories of the Silesian Library there is a CD-ROM, whose existence, to the best of my knowledge, remains unknown to the scholars of Falkiewicz¹¹. Inserted in an optical drive, it reveals a “parcel-website”. In the left corner of the screen one finds a selection of tabs (*Nota bio- i bibliograficzna* [*A bio- and bibliographical note*], *Takim ścięciem* [*Using that stitch*], *Coś z mądrości lenistwa i snu prawie* [*Something almost from the wisdom of laziness and dream*], *Ledwie mrok*, *Świetliste* [*Luminous*], *Być może* [*Perhaps*], *Wobec nowożytnego rozumu* [*In reference to the modern mind*], *Ontologia istnień* [*Ontology of beings*]), above those - the signature *Andrzej Falkiewicz*, on the main page – the explanation “why I’m doing this”:

⁹ This is evidenced by fragments of journal entries from *Takim ścięciem* [*Using that stitch*]. See: Andrzej Falkiewicz, *Takim ścięciem. Zapisy z lat 1974–1976, przepisane w 1986, przeczytane w 2008 roku* [*Using that stitch. Records from 1974–1976, copied in 1986, read in 2008*] (Wrocław: Biuro Literackie, 2009), 177.

¹⁰ Andrzej Falkiewicz, *Ta chwila* (Wrocław: Biuro Literackie, 2013), 89.

¹¹ The parcel-website [electronic document] can be found in the repository of the Silesian Library, sg. no. II 1093417 (see Andrzej Falkiewicz, „Przesyłka-witryna” [B.m.: 2004]), as well as University libraries of Gdańsk, Cracow, Toruń and Wrocław, as well as in the National Library. One may thus assume that the author or somebody from his close circle sent it to those institutions. To the best of my knowledge the „parcel-website” has not been described in any existing study on Falkiewicz.

This parcel is meant for those who would like to become interested in each and every One of us – this is where the notes included here lead (critical works, confession-novels, philosophical essays...) From the nature of my enterprise it follows that these notes do not always fit cultural norms and – by extension – in the readers' impression they often transgress "what is decent". Instead of the gutter of eloquence, passages of cultural references – the ease (shamelessness) of privacy. But they do contain a consistent, carefully articulated philosophical proposition.

I am taking advantage of this medium's low storage cost and free dissemination of texts¹².

The page is not dated, but the properties window informs us that the file was last modified in 2004. We can therefore assume that it was then that Falkiewicz decided to disseminate virtually his most recent texts (i.e., those created from the beginning of the 1990s). Individual tabs contain a few sentences of commentary to a given text and a download link. Falkiewicz thus uploads his books online, ensuring access to them via a network of hyperlinks, which means that the "parcel-website" meets the most basic criteria for a hypertext¹³, which is "a collection of data combined into a system by means of hyperlinks"¹⁴. What is the meaning of this gesture?

In one sense, publishing one's works online could be interpreted as a fulfillment of the neo-avant-garde-messianic promise of creating a communicative community, which frees society from the destructive structures of institutions – a calling to life of a non-hierarchical space of a free exchange of thoughts. For Uniłowski this idea is realized in the way in which information society is organised:

Falkiewicz saw the importance of interactivity and "the principle of mutual contact", that is, equity and mutual substitutability of the sender and recipient roles, which prevent this community from becoming total in character [...] Of course, this is a highly utopian vision, but one cannot fail to notice that subsequent decades saw the emergence of technical possibilities which made that vision partly come true. From the modern perspective Falkiewicz's idea of a communicative community is somewhat reminiscent of a highly idealized image of information society...¹⁵

Is it possible that positioning Falkiewicz's works in a new communicative context, one which requires active involvement from the reader, allows for establishing a new relationship with these texts? Could the properties of that new medium turn the writer's failure into his *opus magnum*? Regardless of whether we believe in the "saving power" of the Internet, the "parcel-website" provides us with new information about *Ledwie mrok* by revealing its previously unknown version. There are two editions of the novel – the first one was published by Wydawnic-

¹²Falkiewicz, „Przesyłka-witryna” [„Parcel-website”].

¹³Given the large number of theories and ideas concerning the category of hypertext, I would like to emphasise that I am referring to Ted Nelson's technical concept of an IT construct, rather than to Gerard G enette's theory.

¹⁴Joanna Fruzyńska, *Mapy, encyklopedie, fraktalne. Hipertekstowe opowieści w prozie XX wieku* [Maps, encyclopedias, fractals. Hypertextual narratives about 20th c. prose]. (Warszawa: Wydział Polonistyki Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2012), 11.

¹⁵Krzysztof Uniłowski, „Andrzej Falkiewicz i neoawangarda” [Andrzej Falkiewicz and neo-avant-garde], in: „Nie przeczytane”, 193.

two Dolnośląskie in 1998, whereas the second one - by Warstwy in 2015.¹⁶ There are several minor differences between these two editions. Neither of the two, however, is equivalent to the “parcel-website” version. Nor has the existence of the latter ever been acknowledged in any commentary on Falkiewicz’s works.

How, then, do the two editions differ from each other? The principal difference are editorial corrections. Both in the computer version of the “parcel-website” as well as in the 1998 print edition sentences are slightly longer (ca. 14,2 words per sentence) than in the book published by Warstwy (13,7)¹⁷. We can also discern subtle visual discrepancies. Chapter 8 of the first edition contains a different third sketch (“a special egogram”) than the ones that can be found in the other two. In the online edition in fragment 15 Queen Elizabeth is replaced by the Austrian Archduchess Stéphanie Clotilde Coburg wearing a nurse’s outfit. But there are also a few other minor changes, which seem to be meaningful from the perspective of a computer-based interpretation.

At the end of the 1998 edition there is a note concerning the use of Microsoft Word 6.0 typographic symbols (LM 521). In the online edition this software is replaced by Windows 98¹⁸, and in the 2015 reprint, in turn, by Mac OS X¹⁹. Similar changes occur in the first sentence of chapter 27. In the first edition we read: “I don’t have Windows 95 on my computer (LM 521)”, in two subsequent ones: “I don’t have Apple... something”. Thus, Falkiewicz updates his operating system between each edition. There are also changes in the operation of the virus sent on the floppy disk. The first version contains the message: „Disc error!, Serious disc error!!!, Del Esc Esc”; in the online version we read „*Brain error! Serious brain error!!! Del Esc Esc*”, and in the second edition this command disappears altogether. Falkiewicz did not introduce many changes between subsequent editions of the book, which is why his work on fragments related to technology seems to be the most significant. Let us therefore take a closer look at it.

The third part of the book comprises almost exclusively the female protagonist’s letters to blondeM, the only exception being chapter 42. After twenty months from the previous contact the mentor sends another message to the woman. It is in that message that he informs her why they cannot meet; he also writes that he managed to finish the book. This letter is sent on a bugged floppy disc. The message contains a postscript, written by the addressee rather than the sender.

Postscript. Mine; after a careful perusal of the letter. Its silent calling is disability, but its true passion is MUTILATION. No, not the brutal one, by means of a knife or a cutting blade. It works IN THE HEAD, which is already mutilated, it washes the brain. Without needing to dry-clean it first! IT IS MY SECOND GREATEST ENEMY! (I am the greatest one). For years it has been fool-

¹⁶Of course, the second edition was published posthumously. However, one of the notes in *Ta chwila* indicates that Falkiewicz had been working on reissuing the book and planned on finishing it in 2009. „PLANS FOR 2009: 1. Finishing – somehow – somehow because somehow – that moment. 2. Publishing *Ledwie mrok* 3. Preparing *Świetliste [Luminous]* for publication (deadline: January 2010!)”. Falkiewicz, *Ta chwila*, 285.

¹⁷The ratio of words per sentence was calculated using Voyant Tools.

¹⁸Falkiewicz, „przesyłka-witryna” 521.

¹⁹Andrzej Falkiewicz, *Ledwie mrok* (Wrocław: Warstwy, 2015), 540.

ing me and driving me crazy. Every time I got better, it made me stupid again with its "advice". I've kept its "concerned" longwinded guidelines as evidence. It won't let the healthy one die! Even Don Quixote was dying in full mental health! His niece had washed his brain before, his housekeeper tapped lightly on his forehead and the priest sprinkled some holy water on him. One can read all about it in Cervantes. But not when that black priest is around! „Dellusio et allusio”. „Jin i jang”. “To live one's own life”. “To give birth to a world capable of existence”. “Not excluding galaxies and cosmic “bubbles”... - Tender motherly scabbing on the wounds! An after-work oozing with pain in the garden! There was never a greater joy for him than a word I had mutilated, an error, tired with my handicap. Silly me, I toiled and toiled for his enjoyment.... I managed to get used to his nonsense, too. But today he has outdone himself. As if all that was not enough, he has sent me a letter on a bugged floppy disc. He infected my computer with the viruses of his gossip (LM 485).

We can surmise that the protagonist added this fragment to the text file she received from the critic. This possibility of never-ending add-ons is characteristic for working with a computer. In his book *Track Changes. A Literary History of Word Processing* Matthew Kirschenbaum points out that, unlike a typewriter, where “composition and editing remained two separate activities”²⁰, a word processor allows for a seamless transition from one model of textual interaction to the other. The recipient becomes a co-creator of communication – while reading, they always (over)write.²¹

The fantasy about remodelling the relationship between the sender and the recipient of a message is, however, disturbed by a concerning fact. We are never really alone when working on a computer. All our actions are accompanied by the hum of programs running in the background. Just as some of the bacteria are necessary for the functioning of the human body, similarly, some processes must operate on the hard drive. Yet, from time to time both spaces are visited by harmful agents, which want to use the networks of productive connections for their own purposes. Perhaps this is where the odd structure of the protagonist's words stems from. The worst part is not so much the fact that the mentor caused her disease, sabotaging her recovery, as his bugging her computer. He introduced undesirable actors to the system. Those, in turn, introduce destruction on the metalevel. First, they infect sources of knowledge: “Viruses! Viruses in Encyclopaedia Britannica, in the Educational programme” (LM 490). Then they remove agency from the program's user, disabling the input device: “Chaotic kilobytes, a mad mouse” (LM 490). A few pages later they similarly affect the output device²², displaying the following image on the computer screen:

²⁰Matthew Kirschenbaum, *Track Changes. A Literary History of Word Processing* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016), 4.

²¹It is worth pointing out the meaningful vocabulary. On reading a text file, computer changes its properties and a slight movement of the cursor by the program user automatically assigns the user the role of a document's author. The technology which mediates communication also remediates the concept of reading and inscribing messages from the traditional media and blurs the boundary between the acts of receiving and sending. A similar problem in the context of translating the thinking about record from literature onto video is discussed by Siegfried Zielinski. See: Siegfried Zielinski, *Audiovisions. Cinema and television as entr'actes in history* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1999), 240.

²²Viruses influence the performance of input peripherals (the mouse) and output peripherals (the monitor), which means that they prevent both entering and reading computer data.

cej. I zawsze pachną kwiaty. Teraz też. Może śnić? Może. Kobiety podobno śnią więcej i lepiej od mężczyzn. Posłuchaj, dziecko. Chciałabym żebyś dokładnie zrozumiała to o śnieniu i nie bala się. Pośnimy. Pośnimy razem. W lustrze. Po drugiej stronie.

BYŚ FADNIEJ WIDYWAŁA MNIE. Dłaczysz Delete Del Esc
 ŚWIATA? LEPIEJ BYM CZYTAŁA MELODIE RZECZY A TY
 KWIATU NAGA — BARDZIEJ OTWARTE NA CIEBIE I
 BYŚ WOLAŁA ŚEBYM CHODZIŁA PO NASZYM MIEŚC-
 CZY MOŻE TUŻ PRZY SZAFIE SŁUCHAĆ? A MOŻE
 BLIŻEJ KUCHNI CZY BLIŻEJ OGRODU, KOŁO DRZWI
 SZAMI WIEDZIEĆ W KTÓRYM MIEŚCIE POKOJU JESTEŚ,
 TAKI SAM METALOWY PAPIER, A NIE POTRAFIĘ CZY-
 DOTYKNIĆ OD KOSTKI MARGARYNY ZAWINIĘTEJ W
 ZNALEŚĆ W LODÓWCE KOSTKĘ MASŁA I ODRÓŻNIAM
 SZADZIWIĄCIE NIEKIEDY NIEPORADNOŚCI UMIEB

Brain error! Serious brain error!!! Del Esc Esc

MAŚLANKI W USTACH I TĄ HERBATA ZAWSZE DOBRZE
 ŚWIERKAMI I JODYNĄ. AŻ SŁOWU: OWSIANE PŁATKI,
 SKÓRA DO... DO CZYSTA WYMYTYA KTÓRA PACHNIE
 ALE NIE WIEM CZYJA. CIEPŁA. CHOCIAŻ Z GŁADKĄ
 PO TWARZY ZAWODZI RĘKA. KTO? WIEM ŻE RĘKA
 CZASU DO CZASU ZESUWANIE Z ŁYŹKI I CZUJE TAK MI
 USTA I DO PRZEMYWANIA, OWSIANE PŁATKI OD
 NIE I PIECZONE RAZEM. KWASNE MASŁANKI W
 (TAKI SŁODKAWY KLEISTY PŁYN) POTEM OBYWAWY-
 POWIEKAMI ŚWIEŁA. CE. G. MAM POCIESZANIE WARGI
 ŁA NIE WYCZUWAM SKÓRA SKRONI, NIE WYKRYJE
 ZWARŁE CORAZ CIEMNIEJ I WRZESZCIE NAWET ŚWIEP-
 WANE OCZY ALE TAK JAKBY ŚMAROWALI ŚMOKA.
 GŁUSZEJ. ZWILŻANE MAM CZĘSTO CZOŁO, PRZEMY-
 ŁAM ŻE MOŻE BYĆ SZCZELNIEJ: JESZCZE ŚPIEPIE,
 SZUMIAŁAM I SZUMIAŁO W GŁOWIE — AŻ ZROZUMIA-
 SIĘ ŻE NIE MOŻNA BYĆ ŚLEPA BARDZIEJ. LEŻAŁAM
 PRZEZ PIERWSZE DWA TYGODNIE WIDYWAŁO MI

As readers we can only look at the destruction created by the viruses in the novel. First of all, there is not too much to read here, because their actions render the text illegible; secondly, there is nothing we can do about it. Instead of the actual *Delete* or *Escape* keys we only have their novelistic props, which can imitate the form but cannot perform the function. *Ledwie mrok* will always remain bugged; after all, it is impossible to update a sheet of paper and return to the fabric settings from before error 490. Here Falkiewicz challenges Jochen Hörisch, who in his introduction to *Eine Geschichte der Medien* discusses self-referentially the limitations of the book format:

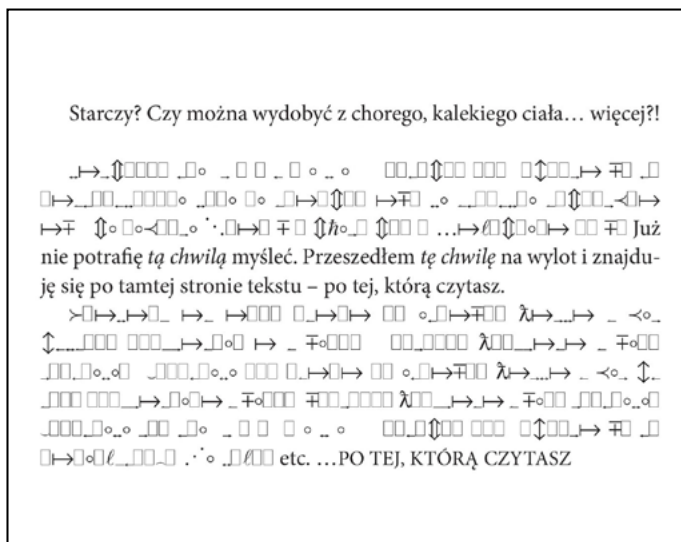
Living sounds, motion pictures and electronically generated letters are the subject matter of this book, but they cannot be included in it, regardless of the author's will, because the classical format of the book forbids it. There is no loudspeaker, monitor or Internet connection. There is no CD-ROM, floppy disc or a cassette attachment. No update can eliminate printing errors. Yet, it requires no batteries, and no power cut can threaten it; no virus can destroy the sequence of letters.²³

If one were to juxtapose these words of the German historian of media with *Ledwie mrok* it would turn out that Hörisch is wrong, or at least partly so. Falkiewicz's writing shows that it is possible to bug a book and update harmful programs in between subsequent editions. In that

²³Jochen Hörisch, *Eine Geschichte der Medien. Von der Oblate zum Internet* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2004), 10–11 (the author's own translation).

sense the work of the author of *Takim ścięciem* is a text featuring an anachronistic reversal. Traditional codex format remediates digitality in its most autonomous stage – that of an error. *Ledwie mrok* would then illustrate the state of a computer understood – to quote from Justyna Janik’s game-theoretical proposal – a resistant object: “in this context the glitch seems to be emphasizing the autonomous nature of the digital game, pointing to its resistance. Thanks to this resistance, the game not only frees itself from the power of the player, but it can also work against them and the designers’ plans. It begins to project its own senses”²⁴.

The freeing of typographic signs from the power of the user is a recurrent topic in Falkiewicz’s works. Of course, this can partly result from his poor digital competence, as proven by his remarks in more private notes – the reissuing of his essay *Nie-przeczytane* [*Un-read*]²⁵ and *Ta chwila* [*That moment*]²⁶. It does not change the fact that some of the errors related to the appearance of the text are purposefully designed by the author for artistic purposes²⁷. He does that, for example in *Ta chwila*, when he mentions *Ledwie mrok*:



Ledwie mrok is an “allegro for a prepared computer”, that machine being as impossible (yet potentially interesting) as the second part of that expression, i.e. “a dynamised harpsichord”. Falkiewicz’s intuitions seem to be confirmed in the work *Digital Contagions: A Media Archaeology of Computer Viruses* by Jussi Parikka. The media theorist, describing the workings of the

²⁴Justyna Janik, *Gra jako obiekt oporny* [Game as a resistant object] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2022), 120. The following analogy seems to apply here: just like the protagonist’s body acquires a kind of autonomy only after her accident because it is no longer objectified, likewise a computer program is revealed through its non-responsiveness.

²⁵Andrzej Falkiewicz, *Znalezione. Szkice do książki* [Found. Sketches for the book] (Wrocław: ATUT, 2009), 138. I am referring to a reissuing because characteristically for Falkiewicz, remarks on technical difficulties only appear in the second edition. A similar pattern can be noticed in the case of typographic experiments with *Takim ścięciem*. A detailed analysis of this regularity is beyond the limited scope of this essay.

²⁶Falkiewicz, *Ta chwila*, 141.

²⁷These are only a few examples, but sufficient to state that in Falkiewicz’s later works the non-cooperativeness of programs was a meaningful inspiration for artistic activity. I do not claim, of course, that the author possessed any specialist knowledge of errors or viruses (although it is worth mentioning here that his son, Wojciech, had been interested in IT since the 1990s, as evidenced in his letters to Karpowicz); what we can notice in his text is rather a particular way of imagining the way in which a computer works.

Cascade virus (which caused letters to drop off screens), defines an end of a certain era of thinking about script:

In a sense Cascade demonstrated a new digital ontology of the script: farewell, discreet, readable Galaxy of Guttenberg's letters; welcome script executed as code on screens [...] The visible layer of the user's graphic interfaces breaks apart, demonstrating that language is not just about meanings and nature but it becomes more and more a binary machine code²⁸.

It is not possible to read *Ledwie mrok* as a successful analog novel. But the role of remediation is important from the interpretative point of view, as are the differences between editions or the fact of distributing the text on a CD-ROM, as they encourage one to place it in the space "between a sheet of paper and a screen"²⁹. That is why a different reading of the novel will be possible if it is recognized as a representative of the "late epoch of print"³⁰. Let us then try to analyse the structure of the work, relying on the concept of hypertext.

Ledwie mrok as a proto-hypertextual non-novel

The seemingly unbreakable bond between hypertext and a digital carrier was not an issue for researchers looking for the precursors of the format amongst texts written on paper. Grzegorz Jankowicz remarks, somewhat jokingly, that "one of the favourite pastimes of theoreticians of e-fiction is a search for proto-hypertextual works in the immense repositories of traditional literature"³¹. Depending on how that concept was defined, predecessors of hyperfiction were found both amongst post-War experiments (Cortázar's *Hopscotch*, Pavič's *Dictionary of the Khazars*, Saporta's *Composition no 1*, Calvino's *Invisible cities* or Nabokov's *Pale fire*³²), as well as in earlier artistic projects (Sterne's *The life and opinions of Tristram Shandy, gentleman*, Potocki's *Rękopis znaleziony w Saragossie* [*The Saragossa manuscript*], Irzykowski's *Pałuba* [*The Hag*]³³). The key criterion of "a certain type of nonlinear organization", which might assume "strong and weak forms", is quite enigmatic. Even though hypertext concerns the possibility of manipulating freely the component parts of the work, the same label is sometimes assigned to works whose plot includes a series of transitions and connections, which do not influence their format or offer any reflection on materiality. This abridged and necessarily incomplete list of concepts highlights the fact that attempts at defining the history and theory

²⁸Jussi Parikka, *Digital Contagions: A Media Archaeology of Computer Viruses* (New York: Peter Lang, 2016), 34.

²⁹I am referring here to the title of Piotr Marecki's book because I believe that *Ledwie mrok*, albeit less hybrid than the texts analysed by Marecki, could benefit from being interpreted as an intermedial object. See: Piotr Marecki, *Między kartką a ekranem* [Between a sheet of paper and a screen] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2018).

³⁰Jay David Bolter, *Przestrzeń pisma* [The space of script], transl. by Aleksandra Małecka, Michał Tabaczyński (Kraków: Korporacja Ha!art, 2014), 39.

³¹Grzegorz Jankowicz, „Granice hipertekstu” [“The limits of hypertext”], in: *Linternet. Literatura i internet* [Linternet, Literature and the Internet], ed. by Piotr Marecki (Kraków: Rabid, 2002), 151.

³²These texts are listed under the entry „Proto-hypertext” on the Techsty webpage, see: „Proto-hypertext”, Techsty 13.07.2022, <https://techsty.art> Mariusz.pl/hipertekst/protohiperteksty.htm.

³³Links between these nonlinear texts and the hypertext are discussed in detail by Mariusz Pisarski. See Mariusz Pisarski, *Xanadu. Hipertekstowe przemiany prozy* [Xanadu. Hypertextual metamorphoses of prose] (Kraków: Korporacja Ha!art, 2013), 111–126.

of hypertext are characterized by, to quote Lev Manovich, information surplus. Therefore, instead of risking confusion in the multiplicity of links, let us opt for but one concept: Espen Aarseth's textual machine³⁴:

As the cyber prefix indicates, the text is seen as a machine--not metaphorically but as a mechanical device for the production and consumption of verbal signs. Just as a film is useless without a projector and a screen, so a text must consist of a material medium as well as a collection of words. The machine, of course, is not complete without a third party, the (human) operator, and it is within this triad that the text takes place³⁵.

Tools proposed by Aarseth are arguably relevant for *Ledwie mrok* because they bring into focus a similar manner of conceptualizing the interactions of a novel and a program. Moreover, they allow a broader perspective on the effects of the text. Hitherto mediation between two elements has been regarded as the key concept in the reading of *Ledwie mrok*. These mediations included communication between the woman and the mentor, relation between manners of expression and styles of broadcasting or connections between body and language. However, maybe it is necessary to incorporate another crucial element of textual interpretation - that of a human operator, without whose energy (as emphasized by Hörisch in a different context) the book does not work properly. The operator's task is then not only to acknowledge the protagonists' mutual manipulations but also to manipulate independently elements of the novel's structure.

The operator's activity helps us notice the wrong order of the novel's chapters: the earlier ones make references to later ones (2 to 10), others, even though they are obvious responses to a letter (e.g. 0), make no reference to anything at all. The first few letters (starting from no. 1) were supposedly sent by mistake. Most of them contain attachments, sometimes acknowledged in the correspondence, but the readers usually cannot access those. Thanks to the mentor's extensive quotations from the letters, whose philosophical-artistic value he evaluates, it is possible to establish that most of the quoted sentences do not appear in the novel at all.

In fragment 23 the mentor collects all information concerning the dates and tries to establish some kind of chronology. He tries to match a year with a letter in one of two ways (the dates he proposes are separated by as many as three years) and declares that the woman is lying: first, to hide her stay in a psychiatric ward, then, to spite him. None of his calculations, however, stands scrutiny. Finally, the entirety of part three is supposed to take place after breaking off contact with the mentor. But the numbering system is the one adopted in the mentor's archive, which means that the critic must at least be receiving copies of the protagonists' intimate correspondence. There are probably more inconsistencies in the novel. I think, however, that the problems listed above show that for *Ledwie mrok* to become a story, the reader needs to undertake exploratory actions.

³⁴Aarseth's concept is, of course, much broader than theoretical ideas listed above (it incorporates a variety of texts, from I Ching to chatbots, adventure games and prose generators from the turn of the 1980s).

³⁵Espen Aarseth, *Cybertekst. Spojrzenie na literaturę ergodyczną* [Cybertext. Perspectives on ergodic literature], transl. by Mariusz Pisarski (Kraków: Ha!art, 2014), 30.

I am not trying to claim here that *Ledwie mrok* is, indeed, a hypertext, but only to indicate that methods developed while reading it as if it were a hypertext could aid with its interpretation, because this manner of reading assumes that the recipient does not simply interpret the text³⁶. This novel then lies on the boundary between a linear and an ergodic text³⁷. Even if the reading of *Ledwie mrok* in juxtaposition to projects whose intermedial nature is more obvious seems to be unjustified, it is worth noticing that the chronology of events in the novel requires “a not insignificant effort from at least one person or mechanism”³⁸. The question remains, who would make that effort? Perhaps the answer can be found in *Być może* [*Perhaps*].

Now the computer in the material tissue of its hardware, prepared for binary operations, contains precisely what is our logic. The system, i.e. that which makes the computer useful, must be external to it, it must originate from outside its logical system, brought to life by the programmer who follows their own logic or illogicality while designing the program. Even in the case of the so-called neurocomputer, imitating the human brain, capable of correcting or self-creating its programs, these programs are outsourced from beyond the system, it is just that now the designing programmer is below the level of the logical system, characteristic of a given computer³⁹.

What level then is the reader on? One answer is offered by the previously quoted glitched fragment of *Ta chwila*, which pertains to *Ledwie mrok*. The paragraph is almost entirely illegible, the only decipherable fragment is “I am on the other side of the text – the one you are reading now”⁴⁰, then the part after the dash is repeated and written in small caps. Perhaps it is not the task of the reader to manipulate individual structural elements of the novel in order to create its plot. It is the mentor who performs the role of the text-external operator. He is the one who organises the letters he received, thus manipulating not only the fragments of the novel but also the sender of these letters and the reader, the latter of whom is a witness to this process. *Ledwie mrok* thus announces certain barriers to hypertext as a literary form. Metaphorically speaking, as pointed out by Andrzej Kudra, the terror (authoritativeness) of the hyperlink, paradoxically, limits interactivity. Excess of hyperlinks may cause information

³⁶Aarseth distinguishes four functions performed by the reader: interpretive, explorative, configurative and textonic. The first one appears in interactions with every text, including the second one into the process of “reading” suggests that we are dealing with an ergodic text, and the latter two – with its dynamic variant (Aarseth, 73–75).

³⁷In this aspect *Ledwie mrok* is similar to Jerzy Andrzejewski’s *Miazga* [Pulp]. Andrzej Pająk emphasises that the author of *Bramy raju* [The gates of paradise] was able to assume that the recipient would move from the journal to the index of people, but this manner of reading was not suggested by the author. Similarly in *Ledwie mrok*, jumping between “lists” of characters, amongst which the woman’s writings typically have the status of an artistic text and the mentor’s – that of a commentary, would enable us to uncover narrative inconsistencies, i.e. the mechanism governing the text. However, Falkiewicz does not implement any form of reference which would make this operation easier. For both novels it would seem that “The explorative function of the user is present, but not directly”. See: Andrzej Pająk, „Na tropie dziwnych książek. Polska droga do e-literatury (od baroku do XXI wieku)” [On the trail of strange books. Polish path to e-literature (from the Baroque to the 21st c.)], in: *Od liberatury do e-literatury* [From liberature to e-literature], ed. by Eugeniusz Wilk, Monika Górską-Olesińska (Opole: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Opolskiego, 2011), 281.

³⁸Aarseth, 103.

³⁹Andrzej Falkiewicz, *Być może* (Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Słowo/Obraz Terytoria, 2002), 101.

⁴⁰This phrase recurs in Falkiewicz’s works, e.g. in *Polski kosmos* [Polish cosmos]. It is worth pointing out that the recurrence to particular motifs and rewriting are characteristic for Falkiewicz’s artistic project and they require a separate consideration, especially in light of the artist’s quasi-journalistic practices.

noise and the reader's fatigue; this might also be the consequence of 'over-information'⁴¹. Just as the letter-inspired form deprives the protagonist of her voice⁴², a hypertext-like structure limits rather than expands the reader's freedom. Preparation, i.e. a compositional technique recalled in the titular quotation, is related to a composer's interference with the instrument's structure, and structural procedures considered here allow for such interpretation of a prepared computer. Yet, it is hard to get rid of less substantive associations with preparation understood as manipulation, misleading the recipient.

In his review of *Ledwie mrok* Krzysztof Uniłowski writes:

I refer to Falkiewicz's book as a novel, but this word – I admit – is inadequate. I used the term 'novel' because I would like this work to be that. Meanwhile, *Ledwie mrok* is a fictionalized essay. It is possible that this is what the book was supposed to be, but if that is the case, it is even a greater shame⁴³.

What if that book was never meant to be a novel? If *Ledwie mrok* is a prepared text, comprising mixed utterances, and only pretending to be a novel? Perhaps it would be worthwhile risking a claim that *Ledwie mrok* was supposed to be a database which, as Manovich says, "in the era of computers [...] becomes an independent cultural form"⁴⁴. Uniłowski notes that "language does not have the ability to [...] want to long for something or to love" but "allows one [...] to find out"⁴⁵. That would mean that the text becomes part of a phenomenon characteristic for the era of information, in which description and the narrative swap places. *Ledwie mrok* can be then read as a non-linear way of organizing knowledge⁴⁶, akin to an encyclopedia (let us recall that it was encyclopedia that appeared on the bugged floppy disc) or the Internet. Instead of a novel we thus get a structured collection of data, divided into sixty-five fragments. *Ledwie mrok* can be both a writer's failure and his *opus magnum*. In print format it would try to recreate the manner of organizing the message, which is characteristic for the new media; to separate noise from information. On one hand, this is a very ambitious task, and Falkiewicz's work becomes a text connecting enthusiasm for encyclopedic properties of the computer with critical thought about the materiality of the medium⁴⁷, characteristic of non-linear experimental works from mid-20th c. On the other hand, it is an impossible task – there is no structural difference between information and noise.

⁴¹Andrzej Kudra, „Hiperjęzyk hipertekstu a chiralność” [„Hyperlanguage of the hypertext vs. chirality], *Media, Kultura, Społeczeństwo* 1 [Media, Culture, Society 1] (2006): 121.

⁴²Marta Koronkiewicz, „Uniemożliwić średniość. Strategie pisarskie w «Takim ściegiem»” [”To prevent mediocrity. Writing strategies in «Takim ściegiem»], in: „Nie przeczytane”, 116.

⁴³Krzysztof Uniłowski, „Modernizm poczty” [„The modernism of the post-office”], *FA-art* 1 (1999): 36.

⁴⁴Lev Manovich, *Język nowych mediów* [The language of the new media] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Akademickie i Profesjonalne, 2006), 104.

⁴⁵Uniłowski, „Modernizm poczty”.

⁴⁶On that note, it is worth quoting Frużyńska's remarks that “nonlinear organization of the text (e.g. a dictionary) is quite frequent in the humanities, although it is restricted to a scholarly utterance and as such, it is juxtaposed with linear fiction, by directly questioning its cognitive importance” (Frużyńska, 63).

⁴⁷This highly interesting contradiction, related to the incorporation of experiments like Hopscotch or Composition no 1 in the history of hypertexts, is also acknowledged by Frużyńska: “the non-linear novel is a product of a protest against the conventions of script and print, whereas the hypertextual novel is usually an act of affirmation of its electronic medium” (Frużyńska, 31).

The analysis of Falkiewicz's work proposed here suggests a particular manner of thinking about proto-hypertexts in literature. Instead of focusing on features like openness and interactivity, perhaps one should put greater emphasis on encyclopedias or databases as cultural formats. After all, in Ted Nelson's definition, hypertext is just a manner of organizing information. Instead of remaining under constant influence of metanarratives concerning the recipient as a co-creator of the open work, perhaps it is worth thinking about processes of construction, which make the text a closed entity. Perhaps one should try to create between a sheet of paper and a screen some new story about the neo-avant-garde, especially about its technological model, highlighted by Stefan Morawski?⁴⁸ Perhaps the printed, codex version of *Ledwie mrok*, which replays on the prepared computer tensions between possibilities and limitations of the new media, could be a prototypical proto-hypertext in this story. This, of course is a song of the future, to recall a musical metaphor, one which exceeds the possibilities of this short essay, inspired by Falkiewicz, one which only runs over a few problems in the allegro tempo.

translated by Justyna Rogos-Hebda

⁴⁸Stefan Morawski, *Na zakręcie: od sztuki do po-sztuki* [At the crossroads: from art to post-art.] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1985), 264.

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KEYWORDS

Andrzej Falkiewicz

NEO-AVANT-GARDE

ABSTRACT:

This publication provides a reinterpretation of Andrzej Falkiewicz's *Ledwie mrok*. This essay-novel is believed to have been an attempt at inventing a new idiom for expressing the experience of corporeality. Following from the reading of the metacommentary describing the author's creative process a claim is made here that for Falkiewicz the role of the new media, computers in particular, was important. His project of "parcel-website", which relies on online publication of earlier texts supports this hypothesis. The interpretative framework adopted here affords a different perspective on *Ledwie mrok* as a text about relations between a sheet of paper and a computer screen. These relations are here problematized by means of the concept of the proto-hypertext, introduced in the final parts of the article.

proto-hypertext

L e d w i e m r o k

experiment

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Tomasz Pułka's personal blogs – concepts and notebooks*

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The goal of the present article is to tentatively determine the functions of Tomasz Pułka's personal blogs in the wider context of his literary *oeuvre*, published both on the Internet and in print. I am particularly interested in two blogs created at the turn of 2008 and 2009, which exemplify different blogging strategies. One is the conceptual dream diary *Insertjazz*² and the other is a blog in the form of a digital notebook entitled *Techniką i wychowaniem* [Technology and upbringing].³ Both projects were created at the end of 2008, at a time when Pułka was already actively publishing his works on two literary websites (*Nieszuflada* [Non-drawer] and *Poezja Polska* [Polish Poetry]),⁴ and at the same time he co-ran the blog *Cichy Nabiau* [Quiet Dairy],⁵ where he published his musical and poetic recordings, graphic art, and multimedia posts. Back in 2008, he also started writing critical texts for the *Niedoczytania* [Unreadable] webpage.⁶ This raises the question about the role of Pułka's personal blogs in the context of so many other parallel digital platforms.

¹ Tables and lists organizing the work of Tomasz Pułka, along with archival material collecting the poet's online output, can be found in the research data repository. See: P. Chorzewska-Rubik, *Twórczość Tomasza Pułki* [The Work's of Tomasz Pułka], Dane Badawcze UW, <https://doi.org/10.58132/E0H5OK>, date of access 30 Sept. 2024.

² Pułka, *Insertjazz*, <http://www.insertjazz.blogspot.com/>, date of access 29 Dec. 2022.

³ PUŁKA\\ [Tomasz Pułka], *Techniką i wychowaniem* [Technology and upbringing], <http://www.techwych.blogspot.com/>, date of access 29 Dec. 2022).

⁴ Fernando Pessoa [Tomasz Pułka], <http://www.nieszuflada.pl/autor.asp?idautora=11227>, date of access 30 Dec. 2022; Tomaszek Halfka [Tomasz Pułka], <http://www.poezja-polska.pl/fusion/profile.php?lookup=57>, date of access 30 Dec. 2022.

⁵ *Cichy Nabiau* [Quiet Dairy], <http://www.cichynabiau.blogspot.com/>, date of access 30 Dec. 2022.

⁶ Tomasz Pułka, <http://www.niedoczytania.pl/author/tomaszpułka/>, date of access 30 Dec. 2022.

In the present article, I am interested in the blog as a genre in the wider context of the tradition of digital life writing, which determines the reception of posts and, above all, challenges the generic stability of entries which may be classified as literary texts.⁷ Pułka's blog entries differ: we may find among them (quasi) diaristic entries which describe (sometimes at random) everyday life, entries in which the poetics of the personal is combined and intertwined with a distinct poetic style, to, finally, entries in which Pułka shared the prose or poems which would later be republished in print or on other websites as literary texts. Such a classification of sources leads to the question about which of the indicated generic frameworks (be it literary, fictional or autobiographical⁸ – as a blog entry⁹) dominates or prevails in the respective texts. In the present article, I examine how the genres of different texts (poem, post, diary entry) published by Pułka on his blog signify in the context of the textual conditions imposed by Blogger.com.

Techniką i wychowaniem – sketchbook, notebook, jotter

In order to identify the moment when Pułka decided to expand his online literary presence by adding yet another – this time autobiographical – format we should study the history behind and the initial entries of Pułka's first personal blog. *Techniką i wychowaniem* was a blog

⁷ Julia Novak, writing about experimental life-writing, draws attention to how sometimes overt dependencies between the author's autobiographical and fictional works undermine the ontological status of texts which may be classified as both. Irene Kacadens, respectively, points to the role of paratexts in distinguishing between fiction and autobiography. Kacadens also draws on Philippe Lejeune and argues that if the paratext makes the reader perceive the text as fiction, it cannot be classified as autobiography. The evolution of Philippe Lejeune's views on this subject was discussed by Paweł Rodak. See, respectively, Julia Novak, "Experiments in Life-Writing: Introduction", in: *Experiments in Life-Writing: Intersections of Auto/Biography and Fiction*, ed. Lucia Boldrini, Julia Novak, Palgrave Studies in Life Writing (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2017), 18; Irene Kacadens, "Experimental life writing", in: *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature*, ed. Joe Bray, Alison Gibbons, Brian McHale (London, New York: Routledge, 2012), 380–392; Paweł Rodak, "Wstęp. Autobiografia i dziennik osobisty jako przedmiot badań Philippe'a Lejeune'a" [Introduction. Autobiography and personal diary as the subject of Philippe Lejeune's research], in: Philippe Lejeune, "Drogi zeszyt...". "drogi ekranie...". O dziennikach osobistych ["Cher écran": Journal personnel, ordinateur, Internet/ "Dear screen": Personal diaries, computers and the Internet], trans. Agnieszka Karpowicz, Magda Rodak, Paweł Rodak (Warsaw: The University of Warsaw Press, 2010), 15.

⁸ While many critics may see the blog as a neutral space and platform, its most popular colloquial synonym, i.e. "a web log" or "an online diary," triggers associations with autobiographical practices. This association is also important for literary scholars who study blogs – they refer to it as a diary (or, in Polish criticism, *silva rerum*). The Internet critic Geert Lovink emphasizes how strongly new digital practices are defined by early adopters, who define models that are later repeated; in the case of blogs, these models were autobiographical. Lovink points out that regardless of the topic, the distinguishing features of blogging are: self-presentation and referentiality, subjectivity, and the audience's expectation that the featured text is non-fiction. See: Geert Lovink, *Zero comments: blogging and critical Internet culture* (New York, London: Routledge, 2008).

⁹ See works which define the blog in terms of genre and medium: Marta Więckiewicz, *Blog w perspektywie genologii multimedialnej* [Blog in the perspective of multimedia genology], *Oblicza Mediów* [Faces of the Media] (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek, 2012); Jill Walker Rettberg, *Blogging* (Polity, 2014); Ruth Page, "Blogs", in: *The Johns Hopkins guide to digital media*, ed. Marie-Laure Ryan, Lori Emerson, Benjamin J. Robertson (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 42–45; Ignacio Siles, "Blogs", in: *The SAGE Handbook of Web History*, ed. Niels Brügger, Ian Milligan (Los Angeles [California], Boston, Massachusetts: SAGE Reference, Credo Reference, 2020), 359–371; Anna M. Szczepan-Wojnarska, "Blogs jako forma literacka" [Blogs as a literary form], *Pamiętnik Literacki* 4 (2006): 191–201; Marta Cywińska-Milonas, "Blogs (ujęcie psychologiczne)" [Blogs (a psychological approach)], in: *Liternet. Literatura i internet* [Liternet. Literature and Internet], ed. Piotr Marecki (Kraków: Rabid, 2002), 95–109. Anna Gumkowska, Maciej Maryl, Piotr Toczyski, *Blog to... blog. Blogi oczyma blogerów. Raport z badania jakościowego zrealizowanego przez IBL PAN i Gazeta. PL* [A blog is... a blog. Blogs through the eyes of bloggers. Report from a qualitative study carried out by The Institute of Literary Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences and Gazeta. PL] (Warsaw, 2009), 4; Sara Akram, "Blog – gatunek w formie kolekcji czy kolekcja gatunków?" [Blog – a genre in the form of a collection or a collection of genres?], *Acta Humana* 8 (2017): 61–72; Maciej Maryl, Krzysztof Niewiadomski, Maciej Kidawa, "Teksty elektroniczne w działaniu: typologia gatunków blogowych" [Electronic texts in action: a typology of blog genres], *Zagadnienia Rodzajów Literackich* 59, 2 (2016): 51–73.

that the poet ran independently from November 14, 2008, to December 30, 2009. A few days before the publication of the first post, Pułka was very active on one of his accounts on the *Nieszuflada* website. However, he broke the rule which stated that users could post only one poem a day and within a few hours he filled his profile with several short trollish¹⁰ entries which seemed to describe the consumption of psychoactive substances in real time. Most commentators perceived them as spam. One user told Pułka to “lock the computer in the other room, cut off the Internet cable with scissors, and restrain from entering the room.”¹¹ The blog does not impose restrictions similar to those imposed by the *Nieszuflada* website – there is no limit to the number of entries the poet can post. Also, it no longer matters whether the text in question may be called a poem, which further complicates the genetic and generic status of posts. Often, as I will demonstrate below, it is difficult to determine what the nature of the entries is – whether they were early versions of literary texts, diary entries, or full-fledged literary texts published on the blog. Works posted on the blog, unlike those published on the *Nieszuflada* website, are not automatically graded. The goal of publishing your work on the *Nieszuflada* website (as suggested by the interface and the note posted by the administrators on the home page, and above all users’ choices) was to obtain critical feedback to your poems. Pułka’s blogs were not as popular as the *Nieszuflada* website and only a few comments may be found under *Techniką i wychowaniem* entries. In practice, this “online diary” turned out to be more private than the poetry website. Popularity (or lack thereof) corresponds to the differences between the website and the blog. On the website, Pułka was just one of many active users and other users did not necessarily visit the website to read poems by specific authors. It is difficult to accidentally find a blog that was not promoted as part of a broader structure. Blogger.com, unlike other blogging portals, for example the Polish platform blog.onet.pl, did not have a dedicated home page with a list of bloggers and promoted entries.¹²

I analyze the content and form of Pułka’s blogs on the basis of the versions archived online after the poet’s death in 2012. The Internet Archive does not contain any versions of the blog that would allow me to determine whether Pułka edited and/or deleted some of his entries.¹³ Such modifications, as we know, could be made on Blogger.com. This is an important reservation in the context of my analysis of the structure, coherence, and chronological arrangement of entries. It is impossible to tell whether the archived version of the blog and the actual blog are identical, so it is difficult to determine whether the poetics of randomness and fragmenta-

¹⁰Marta Koronkiewicz argues that the category of the trickster should be used to interpret subjectivity in Pułka’s poetry. In the case of his online presence, I think that a more appropriate category would be a troll, who first examines the preferences of a group of users (e.g. associated with a specific website), and then deliberately acts against their expectations and tastes. See, respectively, Marta Koronkiewicz, “Posłowie” [Afterword], in: Tomasz Pułka, *Podczas siebie: wybór wierszy* [During Yourself: A Selection of Poems], ed. Marta Koronkiewicz (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Wojewódzkiej Biblioteki Publicznej i Centrum Animacji Kultury w Poznaniu, 2018); Magdalena Kamińska, “Konflikt, przemoc, prowokacja w cyberkulturze” [Conflict, violence, provocation in cyberculture], in eadem: *Nieczne memy: dwanaście wykładów o kulturze internetu* [Naughty Memes: Twelve Lectures on Internet Culture] (Poznań: Galeria Miejska Arsenał, 2011), 15–34.

¹¹Jacek Dehnel, Commentary, <http://www.nieszuflada.pl/klasa.asp?idklasy=123272&idautora=11227&rodzaj=1>, date of access 4 Jan. 2023.

¹²Blog Onet. Main page, <https://web.archive.org/web/20081231012603/http://blog.onet.pl/>, date of access 14 Jan. 2023.

¹³The first archived version of the blog dates back to August 19, 2013, so it was archived after Pułka’s death in July 2012. The home page of Pułka’s profile on Blogger.com states that the blog titled *Techniką i wychowaniem* was run by Pułka alone. The “Team Members” tab only lists Pułka’s profile. Cf. <https://web.archive.org/web/20100903175424/http://www.blogger.com:80/profile/17188899762195186561>, date of access 3 Jan. 2023.

tion identified in the blog's structure is a result of deletions and modifications or a conscious practice.¹⁴ The posthumous version contains texts which may be found scattered throughout the blog as a whole and in individual posts:¹⁵ fragments of prose, poems, short diary entries, digital drawings, and glitch collages. Despite their fragmentary nature, the published texts are arranged in several separate series, draft versions, and interconnected sketches. The blog is like a sketchbook or a notebook in which the writer works on several projects at the same time, makes personal notes (describes his dreams, meals, phrases heard during social gatherings, plans, opinions about books), as well as shares memes, anecdotes, and jokes hastily drawn in MS Paint: "Próbowałem wejść na bani do mieszkania, ale zamiast klucza wyjąłem z kieszeni 10 złotych. Na drzwiach nie zrobiło to żadnego wrażenia" [I tried to enter my apartment drunk, but instead of the key, I found 10 zlotys in my pocket. The door was not impressed]; "Ludzie, kupujący kiwi dzielą się wyłącznie na dwie kategorie: ludzi, którzy lubią kiwi oraz ludzi, dla których kupienie kiwi coś znaczy" [There are two types of people who buy kiwis: people who like kiwis and people for whom buying kiwis means something]. A superficial read may suggest that Pułka numbered his entries, thus achieving some sort of narrative continuity. However, these numbers are quite random (39, then 184, and then 91).

Although it has not been discussed critically so far, the *Techniką i wychowaniem* blog is undoubtedly an interesting text that can be read both as a collection of autonomous texts and as a notebook. The latter is a genetic term:¹⁶ the notebook documents the writer's creative process, how they worked on texts which were later published in other formats and media.¹⁷ For example, the post titled "39" can be interpreted as a draft, a narrative background, for the poem titled *Łuk* [Arc]:

Mój kot ma na imię Program
i wykonuje polecenia.

¹⁴Fragmentation, achieved, among others, by marking omissions in texts, can also be read in terms of the poetics of the blog entries. This interpretation comes to mind especially in the case of two twin ironic posts which explore the notions of redundancy and self-referentiality: Z cyklu "Cykl cyklu" (dwa fragmenty) [From the series "The Series of the series" (two fragments)] and Z cyklu "Cykl cyklu" (jeszcze jeden fragment) [From the series "The Series of the series" (one more fragment)] (*Techniką i wychowaniem*, 16 Dec. 2008, 20 Feb. 2009).

¹⁵For example, a post from December 31, 2008 combines a fragment of a poem, a diary entry, and graphic art. All quotations referring to Pułka's blog entries discussed in the present article are marked with the following abbreviations: the *Insertjazz* blog – IJ and the date of the post; the *Techniką i wychowaniem* blog – TiW and the date of the post. If more than one entry was published on the same day, I also include the title of the post.

¹⁶See: Pierre-Marc de Biasi, Maria Prussak, Filip Kwiatek, *Genetyka tekstów* [Text Genetics] (Warsaw: Instytut Badań Literackich PAN, Wydawnictwo, 2015), 72–74; Mateusz Antoniuk, "Jak czytać stronę brulionu: krytyka genetyczna i materialność tekstu" [How to read a notebook page: Genetic criticism and textual materiality], *Wielogłos* 1 (2017): 39–66. The "notebook" nature of the *Techniką i wychowaniem* blog does not mean that other, more traditional, analog, private, unpublished genetic documents may not be found in the corpus of Pułka's works, such as manuscripts, sketchbooks, and rough drafts. See: Krzysztof Sztafa, "Nota redakcyjna" [Editorial note], in: Tomasz Pułka, *Wybieganie z raję* [Running out of paradise], ed. Krzysztof Sztafa, Joanna Mueller (Stronie Śląskie: Biuro Literackie, 2017), 409–410.

¹⁷Maciej Maryl writes about a similar issue in his essay devoted to Sylwia Chutnik's *Cwaniary* [The Hustlers] and the novel's early version – a series of blog entries. Maryl reads the text originally published on the blog in terms of a "literary startup," i.e. a test version of the novel, which, after achieving success (as demonstrated, among other things, by the readers' reactions) "is removed from the Internet and replaced with the final product – the printed book." See: Maciej Maryl, "Startup literacki. Blog a powieść w odcinkach na przykładzie pierwowzoru «Cwaniar» Sylwii Chutnik" [A literary startup. A blog and a serialized novel – a discussion of the original edition of Sylwia Chutnik's *Cwaniary* [The Hustlers]], in: *Teksty kultury uczestnictwa* [Texts of the culture of participation], ed. Andrzej Dąbrówka, Maciej Maryl, Aleksandra Wójtowicz (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo IBL, 2016), 85–110. Pułka published his texts online not so much to test their popularity but rather to test how they signify in a non-print medium. Moreover, it was not always his intention to publish his works in print.

Interesujące, czarno-białe fotografie (?) przedstawiające
rozrywki filozofów: kawę, szachownicę, papierosy.

Każda z nich wygląda tak samo.

Jak jest być poetą pracującym jako monter,
który – mimo młodego wieku – nosi wąsy,
aż słyszy w Chorzowie od naćpanego fetą
starszego kolegi: „Wantuj to, kurwa, i raczuj!”
i zastyga w przerażającej beztrosce, nie wiedząc,
co to może znaczyć?

Jak jest myć się po pracy? Rozmawiać o czymś weselszym?
Zajebiście.

Czternaście starych, spoconych kobiet,
pracujących w „Gellwe”, nakleja
ukraińskie etykiety na napój „Tiger”,
a ja piję już trzeci za paletą z budyniami.

Magazynier opowiedział mi o dwóch
zgonach wynikłych z przedawkowania,

bym po robocie przywdział zbroję żuła
i w dychę zarobił godzinę.¹⁸

My cat's name is Program
and it carries out commands.

Interesting black and white photographs (?) showing
philosophers' pastimes: coffee, chessboard, cigarettes.

They all look the same.
What's it like to be a poet who works as a fitter?
who – despite his young age – has a mustache,
until he hears in Chorzów from his older friend high on speed: “Want it, fuck it and crawl it!”
and he freezes in terrifying carelessness, not knowing
what could this mean?

¹⁸Tomasz Pułka, “Łuk” [Arc], in idem: Zespół szkół [Area school] (Kraków: Ha!art, 2010), 21. Translation by Małgorzata Olsza.

What is it like to take a shower after work? Talk about something nicer?
Fucking awesome.

Fourteen old sweaty women
at "Gellwe", are gluing
Ukrainian labels onto the bottles of "Tiger" energy drink,
and I'm already drinking my third behind a pallet of puddings.

The warehouseman told me about two
overdose deaths,

so I would put on my hooligan's armor after work
and earned an hour in a tenner.

The blog entry in question reads:

39

Pracowałam wówczas w zabierzowskim Gellwe, przy pakowaniu napojów energetyzujących. Byłam jak limitowana seria coca-coli: dla wszystkich, a jednak kusząca i oryginalna. Jednorazowa jak te plastikowe siatki, co je ze sklepów wycofali na rzecz rozkładających się (!) [I was working in Gellwe [a food manufacturing plant] in Zabierzów at the time, packaging energy drinks. I was like a limited edition of Coca-Cola: for everyone, yet tempting and original. Disposable like those plastic bags that have been withdrawn from stores in favor of biodegradable ones (!)] (TiW, 11 Dec. 2008).

The Polish text makes it clear that the I is female (all verbs have female endings). When we take into consideration that "Gellwe" and "energy drinks" are mentioned both in the blog entry and in the poem, we should probably read it is a note – a draft version – of *Łuk* which shows the perspective of one of the "fourteen old sweaty women." In the poem, however, the perspective of the male poet-fitter dominates – other people's points of view are introduced only through quotations. The blog entry expands the spectrum of techniques used in *Łuk* to show a different perspective (also as regards gender). It is one of the "fourteen women" who speaks in the blog entry. Assuming that the perspective of the I is crucial in this poem,¹⁹ the questions of labor and its social conditions become even more pertinent. The poem touches upon power relations in the context of animals and technology, hired labor, physical labor, play and rest. The way in which the respective characters are introduced also seems to be important: the "philosophers" in the old photograph (which activates the metaphor of temporal, spatial, and social distance) may be contrasted with the I, that is the emotionally complex male poet-fitter. He is a defined

¹⁹I wrote about politics in Pułka's poems and the techniques used to convey the changing points of view in another essay. See: Paulina Chorzewska, "Pozwól, że ci przerwę" [Let me interrupt you], *Mały Format* 7/8 (2018), www.malyformat.com/2018/08/pozwol-ze-ci-przerwe/, date of access 13 Jan. 2023.

and complex figure, explaining “what it is like to be” him. Krzysztof Sztafa thus writes about subjectivity and identity in *Łuk*:

Finally, the poet establishes a different vector of lyrical expression, whose default reference is no longer a specific “I” or “you” but a productive – that is, capable to articulate many points of view, based on inclusive syntheses rather than dysfunctions – deconstruction of the layers of the self [...] Who is this I? This young male poet-fitter with an anachronistic mustache? The I is one of the dysfunctional forms of identity produced at the level of social control in discursive-representational mediation. Pułka wants to move beyond this identity crisis, this molar impasse. His strategy of lyrical emancipation is based on this idea.²⁰

An autobiographical reading of the text is not so much suggested by the conventions of the blog but rather by one of the paratexts in the collection in which *Łuk* appeared. The poet-fitter is not only the “protagonist” of the poem, but also a term used to describe Pułka in a short bio note on the cover.²¹ The woman’s labor highlighted in the blog entry only seemingly acts as an introduction – grammatically, it appears as a context which helps one locate events in time (“I was working ... at the time”) – but then it turns out that in a capitalist economy, hired work may be found everywhere – in the metaphors, images, reflection on gender roles (“I was like a limited edition of Coca-Cola: for everyone, yet tempting and original”). The text in question has a much broader history than the quoted entries, which should be discussed in greater detail in a separate essay. Prior to its publication in the online magazine *e-splot*, and then in the collection *Zespół szkół* [Area school] (both versions of the poem are identical), altered fragments of *Łuk* were published as a blog entry in the form of *code work*²² and as a short entry on a poetry website.²³ However, the blog entry discussed above is the only version that can be genetically linked to *Łuk*. At the same time, it stands on its own, because the idea it describes, a draft version, was not part of the final poem.

The thesis that *Techniką i wychowaniem* takes the form of a notebook or a draft is not limited only to the question of genetic criticism. Let us return to the question of the blog as an autobiographical genre, raised in the introduction. I shall now discuss textual relationships between blog entries and poems which were also published online, albeit in a different generic framework. The post titled *11* reads: “Dzisiaj dowiedziałem się, że w lutym zmarła Janina Zofia Klawe, tłumaczka. Wczoraj chciałem pisać o jakimś wspomnieniu, ale o nim zapomniałem” [Today I learned that Janina Zofia Klawe, a translator, died in February. Yesterday I wanted

²⁰Krzysztof Sztafa, “Pasja kresu. Przyczynek do poetyckiego rejestru Tomasza Pułki” [The passion of the end. Tomasz Pułka’s poetic register], *Wielogłos* 4 (2021): 174 ff.

²¹See: Tomasz Pułka, *Porządkowanie magazynu* [Organizing a warehouse], <http://www.archiwum.ha.art.pl/projekty/felietony/625-tomasz-pulka-porzadkowanie-magazynu>, date of access 13 Jan. 2023.

²²Codework is a genre of electronic literature that combines programming languages with natural languages. As N. Katherine Hayles writes: “Code work’ in its purest form is machine readable and executable [...]. More typical are creoles using ‘broken code,’ code that cannot actually be executed but that uses programming punctuation and expressions to evoke connotations appropriate to the linguistic signifiers.” N. Katherine Hayles, *Electronic literature: New horizons for the literary* (Notre Dame, Ind: University of Notre Dame, 2010), 21.

²³*Kopcimy Cygaro* [We’re smoking a cigar] [Tomasz Pułka], *Ekloga* [Eclogue], www.nieszufłada.pl/klasa.asp?idklsy=129111&idautora=11881&rodzaj=1, date of access 13 Jan. 2023.

to write about a memory, but I forgot about it].²⁴ A clear time reference (“today,” “yesterday”), the use of the first-person singular, and a self-referential theme – writing down and remembering – the proximity of other similar short personal entries, as well as the broad autobiographical context associated with the blog all contribute to the classification of this entry as a diary entry. As regards the temporal reference, it should be noted that the translator mentioned by Pułka did indeed die in February 2008, which means that the poet refers to actual and relatively current events (the entry was published in November 2008). What is interesting from a textual, literary, and creative perspective, however, is not so much the entry itself, but the history of its further transformations and how Pułka expanded the boundaries of the poem, turning the publication into a digital performance.²⁵ The same day (22 Nov. 2008), Pułka posted exactly the same text on the *Nieszuflada* website. He changed his nickname to Fernando Pessoa especially to post this particular entry.²⁶ Readers confirmed in the comments that they noticed the (conceptual) change. One user thus commented on the entry and its context: “The chosen nickname is part of the poem. The author would like his readers to think that Pessoa is mourning his translator.” Janina Zofia Klawe, mentioned by Pułka, translated, among others, the works of Fernando Pessoa. Pessoa is most famous for coining heteronyms. This context is important because Pułka “pupated” many times.²⁷ He posted his works on the same website (mainly *Nieszuflada*) under many different nicknames.²⁸ The fact that the same text was published in a different genre (a transition from a blog entry to a poem published on a poetry website) and under a pseudonym which corresponds to the entry make us read this version of the poem in terms of an autofictional experiment,²⁹ defined by impersonating fictional characters thanks to the possibilities offered by the digital avatar.³⁰ By publishing the same text in the context of other paratexts, Pułka questions the autobiographical associations triggered by the blog.

²⁴TiW, 22 Nov. 2008.

²⁵On time as one of the aspects of experimental autobiographical writing, see: Kacadens.

²⁶The *Nieszuflada* website allows its users to easily change their nicknames. If that happens, all previous posts are displayed under the new nickname. Therefore, the history of old nicknames is not easy to reconstruct. Archived versions of the website (i.e. material that I could not work with) and comments posted by other users in which they address other users using their nickname may be helpful in this respect. By analyzing the latter, I could determine that before “Fernando Pessoa” Pułka used the nickname “strona Birkut” [Birkut page].

²⁷I borrow this term from Rafał Gawin’s essay. See: Rafał Gawin, “Jak niewiele mógł znaczyć dla mnie Tomasz Pułka” [How little Tomasz Pułka could mean to me], *Inter- 4* (2017), www.pismointer.wordpress.com/numery-archiwalne/nr-414-2017/rafal-gawin-jak-niewiele-mogl-znaczc-dla-mnie-tomasz-pulka-retroperspektywa/, date of access 10 Jan. .2023. On the connections between Pułka’s poetry and Pessoa, see further: Joanna Bociąg, “Projekcja, przepracowanie, Pułka, Pessoa” [Projection, reworking, Pułka, Pessoa], *Mały Format 7-8* (2017), <http://malyformat.com/2017/08/projekcja-przepracowanie-pulka-pessoa/>, date of access 30 Nov. 2023.

²⁸Pułka’s alter egos, hidden under pseudonyms, also appear in Pułka’s printed works. For example, Tomasz Hälflka from Pułka’s second book of poems. See: Tomasz Pułka *Paralaksa w weekend* [Weekend Parallax] (Olsztyn: Stowarzyszenie Artystyczno-Kulturalne Portret, 2007).

²⁹Agnieszka Czyżak, “Autofikcja” [Autofiction], *Autobiografia Literatura Kultura Media 2* (2020), 93–98.

³⁰On subjectivity and digital avatars see: Amy J. Elias, “Virtual autobiography. Autobiographies, interfaces, and avatars”, in: *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature*, ed. Joe Bray, Alison Gibbons, Brian McHale (London, New York: Routledge, 2012), 512–527.

Two years later, the original blog entry returns as a fragment of the poem [*Jeżycjada upływa*] [*Jeżycjada transpires*] published in *Zespół Szkół*.³¹ In the poem published in *Zespół Szkół*, the temporal references “yesterday” and “today” were removed. In his online publications, Pułka consciously referred to and worked with the date and time which were displayed on the website, next to the entry. Real time provides constant context for the digital text. In the poem published in *Zespół Szkół*, there is no such detailed date, but time remains an important theme and structural element of the poem. It manifests itself primarily as a motif of memory – as reminiscing, forgetting, remembering, and preserving the past. By repeating the anaphor “In February,” the subject is able to remember something. Still, general time-frame, and not specific dates, is important for the process of remembering. The poem in question (without the digital context, only as a printed text) was interpreted by Agnieszka Waligóra. Waligóra is mainly interested in self-referentiality, and more specifically in the motives of writing, translation, and intertextuality. Janina Zofia Klawe appears in Waligóra’s analysis simply as an archetypal figure of a translator (although the scholar reflects on her role and realizes that she was not an obvious choice).³² Waligóra draws attention to the complicated unformed subjectivity in [*Jeżycjada upływa*], which, I argue, could be combined with the meanings found in the previous digital versions of the poem. For Pułka, Klawe is primarily Pessoa’s translator. And Pułka processed Pessoa’s practices of hiding and multiplying his literary identities in his works.

Insertjazz – a conceptual dream diary

Pułka’s other solo blog, unlike *Techniką i wychowaniem* with its “notebook” poetics, is a conceptual project that the poet pursued briefly yet intensively at the turn of 2008 and 2009. Some of the entries on the *Techniką i wychowaniem* blog also describe dreams – at times also in a musical context – “Śni mi się, że Madzia śpi obok, a ja – jak niemy DJ, puszczając Cheta Bakera – wywołuję w niej sen o bezprzewodowości” [In my dream Madzia is sleeping next to me, and I – like a silent DJ who plays Chet Baker – make her dream about wirelessness] (TiW, 20 Dec. 2008). A few days after posting this entry, Pułka created *Insertjazz*, and he no longer described his dreams on other blogs, which demonstrates that he took a “draft” version of a specific concept and found a dedicated space for it. The *Insertjazz* blog, similarly to *Techniką i wychowaniem*, is neither discussed nor acknowledged in critical texts devoted to Pułka’s works. Importantly, unlike *Techniką i wychowaniem*, the entries on *Insertjazz* were original and not republished. The subtitle in the header explains the idea behind the new blog: “«CODZIENNE» JEDNA PŁYTKA NA DOBRANOC, ZAPĘTLONA W ODTWARZANIU. «RANO» – CO SIĘ ŚNIŁO] [‘EVERY DAY’ ONE CD, PLAYED ON LOOP, TO WHICH I FALL ASLEEP. ‘IN THE

³¹Tomasz Pułka, “[Jeżycjada upływa]” [*Jeżycjada transpires*], in idem: *Zespół szkół*, 28. The poem was also later published without any changes (compared with the version published in *Zespół Szkół*) in the magazine “Zeszyty Poetyckie.” The poem was also published in the digital collection *Dziewięć wierszy jako nocleg* [Nine Poems as Accommodation]. Typography and layout were modified. See: Tomasz Pułka, “[Jeżycjada upływa]”, *Zeszyty Poetyckie* (2009), www.zeszytypoetyckie.pl/poezja/235-tomasz-puka#, date of access 13 Jan. 2023. Tomasz Pułka, “[Jeżycjada upływa]”, in: *Dziewięć wierszy jako nocleg*, 3-4, www.cichynabiau.blogspot.com/2008/11/dziewi-wierszy-jako-nocleg.html, date of access 13 Jan. 2023.

³²Agnieszka Waligóra, *Nowy autotematyzm: metarefleksja w poezji polskiej po roku 1989* [New self-referentiality: meta-reflection in Polish poetry after 1989] (Kraków: Universitas, 2023), 135.

MORNING' – MY DREAM]. Each post is formatted according to a strict pattern: the title refers to the CD and the dream is described in the entry. The entries are more or less the same length, and each also includes the album cover. Similarly to Pułka's other projects on Blogger.com, *Insertjazz* is a multi-media concept, where digital text, image, music, and film intertwine (changes in scenery in Pułka's dreams are visually announced by the word "[cut]" which refers to montage and film editing).

Quotation marks in the words "every day" and "in the morning" seem to be important for the entire concept, because Pułka uses them to indicate his distance to the challenge he set for himself. He emphasized that it would be difficult to complete this "task," and that the implied consistency is but an assumption. Pułka's blog entries are a daily routine and as Geert Lovink explains blogging – as a cultural practice – can help one organize and structure one's life.³³ Imposing strict concepts and goals on blogs is a practice deeply rooted in the history of the genre, as pointed out by Jill Walker Rettberg, who writes about blog narratives constructed around a specific sentence, resolution, or routine, which require perseverance and consistency. One example may be blogs-diaries focused on weight loss or debt help blogs.

Pułka's dream diary is an experiment in the field of consciousness and language. Textual effects are combined with themes important to Pułka, such as subjectivity or repetition. The subject in Pułka's poems distances himself from his narrative, comments on it, asks himself questions, and engages in a dialogue. Pułka's poetics is also defined by multiplying perspectives. He often writes about looking and visual disturbances (as also announced by Pułka in the titles of his early collections *Rewers* [Reverse] and *Paralaksa w weekend* [Weekend Parallax]).³⁴

Dreams are described in the first person, and their narrator often takes on the role of someone else. In some cases, this experience is presented directly and combined with the adoption of a different point of view:

Jestem diodą obserwującą swoje siostry [...] [I am a diode watching my sisters] (IJ, 5 Jan. 2009)

Ja sam jestem nauczycielem muzyki i widzę siebie z perspektywy oczu mojego brata, gdy wychodzę z pokoju nauczycielskiego i wolnym krokiem zmierzam w stronę klasy [...] [I am a music teacher and I see myself from the point of view of my brother when I leave the teachers' lounge and slowly walk towards the classroom] (IJ, 3 Jan. 2009)

Jestem moim własnym sąsiadem z dzieciństwa, [...] obserwuję jak „sam siebie odwiedzam” (!), tj.: będąc swoim sąsiadem, odwiedzam się (siebie) jako dziecko, wraz z synem sąsiada, Michałem. To dziwne uczucie, bo obaj (ja z dzieciństwa i ja-sąsiad) „wiemy”, Michał nie [...] [I am my childhood

³³Lovink, 28.

³⁴See: Paweł Kaczmarski, "Wzdłuż linii załamań" [Along the fold lines], *Dodatek LITERACKI* 8(9) (2011): 16–17; Jakub Winiarski, *Paralaksa dla Poli Raksy* [Parallax for Pola Raksa], www.nieszufada.pl/klasa.asp?idklasy=105371&idautora=8786&rodzaj=5#, date of access 13 Jan. 2023; Jerzy Suchanek, "Kaszel jest jak topiący się chłopczyk" [Cough is like a drowning boy], *Akant: miesięcznik literacki* 2 (2008): 42–45.

neighbor, [...] I observe how I “visit myself” (!), i.e.: as my neighbor, I visit myself (me) as a child with the neighbor’s son, Michał. It’s a strange feeling, because we both (my childhood self and my neighbor) “know,” Michał doesn’t] (IJ 26 Dec. 2008)

In the above entry, quotation and exclamation marks inserted in brackets emphasize the absurd and demonstrate that the dreaming subject is aware of how unusual the situation is. However, other texts which describe a similar experience do not thematize the multiplied perspective. The situation is described without questions or comments. In a different text, Pułka saturates the text with details – negations, quotation marks, and lists – as if he were trying hard to capture the uncertainty of the dream in language. Still, he also leaves traces of original ideas, attempts, and linguistic doubts:

Jestem nauką języka. Nie, nie “nauczycielem”, nie “lektorem”, nawet nie “podręcznikiem”. Jestem nauką języka, i to nawet nie “języka obcego”; ale jakąś bezkształtną (a mimo to jakby “kościastą”; “chitynową”) gramatyką, składnią, fleksją, etc. [...] [I am the learning of a language. No, not a “teacher,” not a “lecturer,” not even a “textbook.” I am the learning of a language, and not even a “foreign language;” but some shapeless (and yet somehow “bony;” “chitinous”) grammar, syntax, inflection, etc.] (IJ, 27 Dec. 2008).

Pułka often uses parenthetical question marks which disrupt the coherence of the text: “Więc dopiero po kilku latach (?) władze zauważają, że już niewiele studni «operuje» wodą, że są same dla siebie; jak te pawie ogony, mające przyciągnąć partnerki” [So only after a few years (?) the authorities notice that only a few wells “operate” with water, that they exist because they exist; like those peacock tails designed to attract partners].³⁵ Such interjections disrupt the narrative and raise questions about the I and the self-referential nature of the texts. They create confusion at the level of the sender, posing the question: who is the source of doubt expressed using question marks? Is it the dreaming subject or the narrating subject? Do question marks refer to the inaccuracies and misunderstandings within the described dream world or the work of memory that recalls a given dream?

I do not think that the purpose of Pułka’s blog is only to describe (“reflect”) what it feels like to dream as precisely as possible. I agree with Arkadiusz Wierzba when he writes that, as in Pułka’s narcotic prose published in the collection *Vida local*, also here “the emphasis is shifted [...] from subjectivity to the tool that constructs it.”³⁶ The dream diary describes, similarly to prose fueled by drugs, an altered state of consciousness. Moreover, even if we carefully investigate Pułka’s online presence, we will not find out whether the poet actually listened to the music mentioned in the blog in his sleep, and whether the entries describe his actual dreams. It should be assumed that Pułka’s dream diary, like many other fictional blogs, may be only a generic framework for a (quasi)autobiographical literary text.

³⁵IJ, 27 Dec. 2008.

³⁶The critic refers to the following quote from an introduction to a collection of Pułka’s short stories: “The three stories in the collection discuss a psychedelic experience through which ‘language’ goes.” Tomasz Pułka, “Zamiast (?) wstępu” [In lieu of (?) an introduction], in: *Vida local* (Kraków: Ha!art, 2013), 5.

I treat Pułka's concept with suspicion because I take into consideration the technological conditions of the project and its online nature. In the header, Pułka stated that his entries would be published "in the morning" and, indeed, the entries would appear between 9 a.m. and 1 p.m. However, the user may freely manipulate posting times without leaving any visible traces on Blogger.com,³⁷ which means that the timestamp next to the entries should not be trusted unconditionally when dating sources.³⁸ Blogger.com allows users to turn time into a literary tool. Another clue that challenges the interpretation of Pułka's blog as an "authentic" record of life is the structure of the entries: descriptions do not necessarily reflect the often disordered and interrupted narratives of dreams. They are, in that sense, literary. Pułka often relies on some sort of conclusion or climax (e.g. in the entry from 23 Dec. 2008) and frame tales (in the post from 24 Dec. 2008, the motif of coughing appears only in the first and the penultimate sentences: "Najpierw kaszlę przez pół nocy, [...] Dookoła kaszel; jakbym stał na skrzydle i słuchał silników" [First, I cough for the better part of the night, [...] There's coughing all around; it's as if I were standing on a plane wing, listening to the engines]).

The blog as a neutral format or an autobiographical frame – between rigor and chaos

The autobiographical adds an additional layer of meaning to Pułka's works published on the blog. *Techniką i wychowaniem* is a diary, a notebook, a collection of draft versions of his works. Devoid of rules, it relies on chaos, fragmentation, narrative loops, repeatability and recurrence. The ideas noted down in this "notebook" were often used and reworked later. *Insertjazz*, on the contrary, is based on a very specific concept. It is an inverted diary in which the author records his dreams and not the events of the day. Interestingly, Pułka chooses an orderly and repeatable formula to describe the (unconscious and uncontrollable) experience of dreaming. He tries to "condition" his dreams using music, and later describes them in a rigorous manner. The extent to which the autobiographical is revealed depends on the platform and the generic framework imposed by it. The blog triggers autobiographical interpretations, which is especially evident when the text is first published on a blog and then in a different medium. I do not discuss all instances in the present article but twelve entries on *Techniką i wychowaniem* were also later republished somewhere else; six of them were published in *Zespół szkół*.

Entries published on the blog constitute the second largest part of Pułka's digital corpus.

³⁷The source code of the website informs us about the date of the last edit of the post and the time zone set by the blogger, but it is impossible to determine whether the set date and time of the entry correspond to the actual time of publication.

³⁸As part of my research on Tomasz Pułka's digital works, I analyze how his texts were conditioned by the possibilities and limitations of the respective websites and their interfaces. My examination of the dating of entries on Blogger.com is based on preliminary analyzes of the modern version of Blogger.com (January 2023). Ultimately, I intend to analyze the historical form of the website (its operation and interface between 2008 and 2012).

In the present article, I did not refer to the poet's last personal blog from 2012, titled *Estetyka poglądów* [Aesthetics of views]. *Estetyka poglądów* also relied on the autobiographical but mostly in the form of photography and not texts. Respectively, *Cichy Nabiau* was an art-blog run by Pułka together with other cyberpoets and the art collective *Rozdzielczość Chleba* [Bread Resolution].³⁹ Blogger.com was a fairly flexible writing space for cyber-creators, allowing them to experiment with mixed media and the intermedial (by playing with formatting, images, sounds, hyperlinks, videos). The interface allowed several people to write one blog together, and the entries were attributed to the respective authors. Blogging was just one form of online presence used by the collective. *Cichy Nabiau* was also active on *Nieszuflada*, but the website was primarily used to promote new blog entries.⁴⁰ *Cichy Nabiau* published their works in the "Poems" section only three times. The collective centered on the visuality of the text, and *Nieszuflada* was not the best platform for them.⁴¹

Cichy Nabiau's posts were not as strongly conditioned by the autobiographical framework as Pułka's blog entries. The blog was simply a convenient digital publication format. Respectively, Blogger.com also conceived of the blog as a content-neutral medium/format.⁴² It was meant to be convenient, accessible (even to people with no programming experience), and, above all, free.

The blog, as part of the corpus of Pułka's texts, was used in different ways, all of which reflect the general shifts identified in the history of this genre.⁴³ From a more genre-determined "internet diary," we move towards a content-neutral medium, a convenient way of publishing, also for such a demanding group of users as cyberpoets. The last step in this process took place after Pułka's death, at the end of 2013. *Cichy Nabiau* ceased to be a blog and moved onto a social media platform.⁴⁴ Concurrently with this transition,

social media absorbed and dominated both the technology and practice of blogging, trans-

³⁹The archived version of Pułka's profile on Blogger.com shows a list of users who contributed to the blog *Cichy Nabiau*: <http://www.web.archive.org/web/20100903175424/http://www.blogger.com:80/profile/17188899762195186561>, date of access 13 Jan. 2023.

⁴⁰*Cichy Nabiau*, Forum threads, <http://www.nieszuflada.pl/menu.asp?rodzaj=2&idautora=11076>, date of access 13 Jan. 2023.

⁴¹This can be observed in the entry on the *Wchuończ ynternet* [Apsorp the ynternet] blog. The work was originally a screenshot, which documented the spatial and visual composition that informs the entire text, namely the experience of being online, the experience of multi-linearity and simultaneity of digital content⁴. The version posted on *Nieszuflada* is conditioned by the website's interface, which introduced typographical limitations. Also, users could not preview the final version of the text before publication, and they could not edit it after it was published. On *Nieszuflada*, the layout of the entry retains some key elements, but the arrangement of words is more horizontal. The original vertical layout, which alludes to the screen, is compromised. Moreover, in order to see everything, one needs to scroll down the page. The way one interacts with the text changes, and its meaning also changes. See, respectively, PUŁKA\ [Tomasz Pułka], *WCHUONÓC YNTERNET (wiersz wspólny)* [PUŁKA\ [Tomasz Pułka], *APSORP THE YNTERNET* (collective poem)], <http://www.cichynabiau.blogspot.com/2008/10/wchuo-nترنت.html>, date of access 13 Jan. 2023; *Cichy Nabiau*, *Wchuończ ynternet* [Apsorp the ynternet], <http://www.nieszuflada.pl/klasa.asp?idklasy=121563&idautora=11076&rodzaj=1>, date of access 14 Jan. 2023.

⁴²Siles, "Blogs" 363.

⁴³Ignacio Siles, "From online filter to web format: Articulating materiality and meaning in the early history of blogs", *Social Studies of Science* 41, 5 (September 2011): 737–758.

⁴⁴*Cichy Nabiau*, <https://pl-pl.facebook.com/cichynabiau/>, date of access 13 Jan. 2023.

forming it into a phenomenon called microblogging,⁴⁵ which introduced shorter forms. Reach increased but at the cost of independence, as one had to rely on specific applications and platforms.⁴⁶

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

⁴⁵Ignacio Siles describes the history of blogs in the context of social media. See: Siles, "Blogs."

⁴⁶I am referring to how social media monopolize the Internet – in many cases, only registered users may freely access content and the sites are constructed in a way that does not encourage people to leave the frameworks imposed by them.

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KEYWORDS

TOMASZ PUŁKA

blog

ABSTRACT:

This article analyzes two previously unstudied blogs by the poet, prose writer, and digital creator Tomasz Pułka. Treating the blog as an autobiographical genre, the article asks how the blog challenges the generic stability of entries which may be classified as literary texts. Digital philology and genetic criticism are employed to analyze Pułka's works. Two models of blogging that were practiced by Pułka from 2008 to 2009 are discussed: the first is the notebook mode and the second is the intermedial model. The undertaken analysis gives rise to a tentative history of Pułka's creative process and highlights the connections between the poetics of the blog, conditioned by the possibilities and limitations of Blogger.com, and the poetics of poetic texts acknowledged by literary criticism.

digital autobiography

digital genres

notebook

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