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Representing the Ukrainian Migration Experience: From a Cultural Monologue Towards Interculturality

I would only like to tell you, dear daughter, that if you decide to move to Poland—beyond the even horizon—we will only be able to imagine how you're doing with the help of stereotypes at our disposal. Absolutely no event will reach us directly.

Jarosław Murawski, Michał Buszewicz
(from the journal of Olena Apczel)

It is worth starting with the observation that from the point of view of the host, the guest loses his or her regional identity with only a reduced national costume, provoking in effect only stereotypical assessments. The homogenizing gaze of the conventional autochthon applies to virtually anyone crossing the border, regardless of the reason for their visit; they can be a tourist as well as an economic migrant. Therefore, when abroad, we are most often perceived in terms of our nationality, with the nuances of our local identity ignored.

The first attempts made by Polish artists to represent the Ukrainian migration experience only confirm this observation. One can list, for example, the documentary *Pani z Ukrainy* (A Woman from Ukraine) by Paweł Łoziński from 2002 or *Ukrainka* (A Ukrainian Woman) by Barbara Kosmowska from 2013. The very titles suggest the intention of creating group portraits of Ukrainian women migrating to Poland. However, both these projects, as seen by the critics, brought rather counterproductive results. Łoziński was accused of succumbing to a number of inequalities, including those related to social status

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and linguistic competence. As a result, the seemingly pleasant conversation between the director and the heroine of the film did not appear to be a dialogue between equal partners, but rather turned into an objectifying interrogation of a woman (Dabert 2013: 160).

Kosmowska's *Ukrainka* was meant to be, according to the author's intention ("*Ukrainka*" *zrujnuje stereotypy pro ukrainok?* 2013), a contemporary version of Cinderella for adults; however, the glaring abundance of one-dimensional characters and didacticism is more suited to YA literature (Haleta 2013).

It is difficult to tell whether the above attempts—all panned by the critics—to create empathic images of guest workers had any chance of being successful. Are the portraits—however kind—written by the artists/hosts able to fulfill the postulate of weakening the mechanisms of stereotyping, which invariably accompany economic migration? It is doubtful, because a one-sided representation cannot replace authentic dialogue and it always commits the same sins: it says more about the artists and their world than about the newly arrived Other. And it does nothing to prevent a talented high-school student some time later, unconstrained by political correctness, to rap the following words: "Mój ziomo na uro dostał te kluczyki od merca / Na czarno Ukry sprzątały mu penthouse" ("My homie got these keys to his mercedes / Ukrainians cleaned his penthouse off the books") (Mata 2019). These two verses, with their disarming honesty and laconic diagnosis of reality, may evoke more anxiety than the two aforementioned titles with their attempts to embellish the uncomfortable reality. Although these verses are still statements uttered within the framework of a cultural monologue.

Pani z Ukrainy and *Ukrainka* were undoubtedly borne from the desire to give voice to subalterns, who were accorded this status as a result of migration mechanisms. At the same time, they revealed a whole range of limitations resulting in restrictions on statements made by the interviewer (*Pani z Ukrainy*) or statements on behalf of someone (*Ukrainka*). In the first case, the heroine of the film in an intimate portrait may, admittedly, complain about her ex-husband, but for understandable reasons she cannot refer unfavorably to the Polish employer, who is also the author of the documentary. In the second case, the Ukrainian protagonist is immediately marked by the migration trauma and from the moment she crosses the border she dreams of returning to Ukraine as soon as possible with her partner. Kosmowska was not able to write this narrative any other way. The text of an indigenous person writing a newcomer's migration success story automatically becomes unreliable and resembles an advertisement from an employment agency. The first literary account of Ukrainian migrants in Poland (*Polak z Ukrainy* by Dima Garbowski and works submitted for the

competition “My first and one hundred and first day in Poland”¹ are a kind of testimony of enthusiasts. This term was used by Ruth Johnston in the 1960s to describe Polish migrants in Australia who were characterized by their “deep sympathy, admiration and enthusiasm for the country of settlement as well as for its inhabitants” (Włodarczak 2005: 5). Writing personal success stories by migrants can of course be part of a cultural mimicry strategy, but it does not have to be this way every time. Lastly, however critical the texts of native authors may be towards the condition of Polish society, they are not able to answer the question of whether the Polish audience is ready to accept a critical, or even an ironic, commentary from a Ukrainian artist. Perhaps they will perceive the image of a spiteful Polish housewife from Kosmowska’s novel differently than the model of a stereotypical Polish married couple visiting Lviv, created by the Ukrainian playwright, who claims that “this Lychakiv Cemetery is like connecting with the soul of the nation via Bluetooth” (*Pilka leci na wschodni brzeg / The Ball Flies to the East Bank* 2021).

Today, Ukrainian voices are heard more and more often in Poland, providing an opportunity not only to work through painful traumas from the past, but also, due to the constant presence of Ukrainian co-inhabitants, to develop our ability to recognize mutual cultural codes, which in turn could reduce the potential for generating future traumas within the transformed habitus.

Interestingly, each art form seems to have its own way of producing intercultural texts of culture. Perhaps literature has the longest path, as it is conditioned by the need for writers to master a new language. This is confirmed by the findings of Russell King, John Connell, and Paul White, who in the well-known work *Writing Across Worlds: Literature and Migration* proposed a model according to which a long-term transition takes place from literature written in the language of the old motherland, meant to preserve identity, towards the inclusion of new transcultural authors into the hitherto “nationally homogeneous” literary discourse in the country of settlement (King, Connell, White 1995: xi–xiii). The model proposed by the aforementioned researchers applies mainly to Western Europe and the mid-nineteenth century. However, in its general outline, it is quite universal and remains timely, despite significant civilizational changes. Most likely, therefore, among the several hundred thousand Ukrainian students who have in recent years started their education in Polish schools are those who will soon change the landscape of Polish literature. Meanwhile, the work of Żanna Słoniowska and Walery Butewicz can be read as a prelude to an intercultural breakthrough. In the case of the author of *Dom z witrażem* (The

1 Works submitted to the contest are scheduled to be published in 2023.

House with a Stained Glass Window), Lviv becomes a kind of handicap. Being the writer's place of origin, Lviv not only equips her with linguistic competence, but also, as a discourse, becomes a potential point of contact in communicating with a new (recovered?) audience. *Dom z witrażem*, however, does not fit into the trend of borderland nostalgia, as some readers might have expected, and the author herself talks about her own sense of strangeness in the Polish reality of the early twenty-first century.

I came to Poland and saw that I'm not Polish. Earlier, I had thought that perhaps I am because of my provenance. When I started living here, I saw that I'm absolutely not Polish, because no one considers me Polish. I had to somehow deal with that and then I started to ask myself the question: who am I? And it turned out that it's a kind of Otherness, all that I left behind and where I grew up and how I was raised. It is a kind of Otherness and it's a topic for a book, that is, what I would like to write about it. This is why I'm very grateful to the Polish language, as I don't think I would start writing in my languages [Ukrainian and Russian]. [...] I wanted to tell Polish people about Lviv, among other things. (*Do kogo należy polska literatura 2017 / Who Does Polish Literature Belong to?*)

The aphoristic work of Butewicz, born in 1983 in Czerkasy, proves that a fresh look at the Polish language by authors with a migration background, one that, for example, lacks the automaticity with which we tend to read conventionalized metaphors, can have an invigorating effect. "The Polish language is a very nihilistic language, in the word 'existence' [istnienie] there is a double negation of being: *ist-nie-nie*," writes Butewicz in his *Dziennik uroku zarazy* (Journal of the Plague's Charm), which was awarded the main prize in the literary competition "Dziennik pandemiczny" (Pandemic Journal) (Butewicz 2020: 20). In the jury review, prof. Piotr Müldner-Nieckowski wrote that Butewicz's work brings to Polish literature what Joseph Conrad once gave to English poetics or Vladimir Nabokov to French and American poetics—his own particular tone, his own linguistic wit, new words, certain reconstructions or renovations of phrases (Müldner-Nieckowski 2020).

In view of the aforementioned limitations blocking the development of Polish intercultural literature, which could work through the Ukrainian migration experience, this task is taken over by the visual arts (e.g. Lia and Andrija Dostliev's *Reconstruction of Memory* from 2016 or Stepan Rudik's *Niewidzialni* [The Unseen] from 2018) and, most of all, the theater. The journalistic trend in

contemporary theater, drawing on the emancipatory tradition of actors taking part in the theatrical production, enables Ukrainian voices to be heard and articulated without the help of a Polish intermediary. At the present stage, the mere fact that they are heard is an achievement onto itself, even if it ends there and does not lead to more profound artistic achievements. In a self-referential commentary in the play *Piłka leci na wschodni brzeg* (Ball Flies to the Eastern Shore), Olga Maciupa describes the situation in the following manner:

How to stage this? There is no action and no conflict. And the characters are not defined, they do not react to each other, but only talk. There is no feeling. It's not art. Viewers won't buy tickets for something like this. These modern dramas of yours are complete nonsense. They simply do not exist—like a toilet in Ikarus. (Maciupa 2021)

Thus, the theater became an opportunity and a channel of communication that easily bypasses the problems inherent in literary dialogue. For example, it efficiently deals with the challenge of presenting *surzhyk* (a specific mixture of Ukrainian and Russian), which, as Katarzyna Kotyńska writes, is a potential tool and means of expression for the writer, and for the translator it is another puzzle that needs to be solved in the translation process (Kotyńska 2021: 119). In *Więzi* (Ties), performed in the Wybrzeże Theater in Gdańsk and directed by Olena Apczel, the actress playing the role of the grandmother addresses the audience with the following words: “Grandma uses Russian words and a Ukrainian way of speaking. In order to convey this confusion, in this performance, Grandma will use Polish words and a Kashubian way of speaking” (Murawski, Buszewicz 2019).

A separate issue is the current trend in Polish theatre of combining artistic and social practices. This includes all theatrical activities that are intended to integrate the migrant community and in which the process of preparing the performance is equivalent in value to the performance itself. Similar practices should be considered from the perspective of sociology or psychology of art, as Elwira Grossman writes in the context of Polish migration to Great Britain after 2004, discussing the activities of Robert Przekwas's Scottish-Polish Gappad theater:

It is difficult to unequivocally assess the artistic value of the group, but it seems to me that is beside the point, especially when we consider how extremely important role Gappad played in the Polish and emigrant community in Scotland. The members of this community wrote

a fascinating chapter in transcultural theatre, breaking the social and cultural isolation. By illustrating the emigrational and identity dilemmas, they were able to introduce this topic into a wider public discourse. (Grossman 2016: 73)

Among similar social and artistic initiatives focusing on groups with migration experience, one can mention, for example, the Emigrant Theater in Poznań or the independent artistic platform “TransDramaticum” in Lublin.

Artists working in Polish-Ukrainian theatrical groups have attempted to deconstruct the utopian and simplistic project of searching for the image of a “true Ukrainian woman” (as the examples at the beginning of the text show, it is more often about portraying a Ukrainian woman than a man). In the award-winning play *Lwów nie oddamy* (Lviv, We Won't Give Up – the pun is untranslatable), directed by Katarzyna Szyngiera, the actress Oksana Czerkaszyzna asks:

Will somebody finally explain where the director is? What does it mean to play the role of a real Ukrainian? Did you invite me to play the role of a “real Ukrainian” so as to signal that you are friendly and nice towards me and that you really have no problems and that only politicians are divisive? (Szyngiera et al. 2018)

Any generalizing portraits should probably be considered as attempts to reduce the level of fear associated with the presence of Others. However tendentious, stereotypes create an opportunity to familiarize oneself with the new reality. Sociologist Piotr Sztompka claims that the essence of stereotypes is how they generalize all members of a community, presenting them in an undifferentiated way, regardless of their individual attributes (Matuszczyk 2021: 216). In the case of Polish-Ukrainian contacts, this is related to the perception of all Ukrainians arriving from abroad as potential supporters of Stepan Bandera's policy (the stereotype of a Ukrainian-Banderite) and responsible in one way or another for the Volhynia crime (the stereotype of a Ukrainian-butcher). Added to this is the growing interest in Poland in the topic of mass murders committed on Poles, thanks to the film *Wołyń* (Volhynia) by Wojciech Smarzowski and the annual celebrations commemorating those events, the knowledge about the crime “went beyond the hermetic circles of professional historians and borderland communities and reached a wide audience” (Herrmann 2018: 1). Thus, the Volhynian trauma reached a general social dimension. This changed the situation of Ukrainian migrants in Poland in such a way that each of them became a potential recipient of claims and accusations regarding responsibility

for the crime. Ukrainians were asked about Volhynia in their new workplaces, in public transport, during academic lectures and social meetings. Magdalena Sobień-Górska in the reportage *Ukrainki. Co myślą o Polakach, u których pracują?* (Ukrainian Women. What Do They Think About the Poles They Work for?) asked Ukrainian immigrants if they had heard anything unpleasant about themselves in the context of Volhynia. One replied in the following way:

Yes, and surprisingly not from a drunk in a bus or a football fan returning from a match, but in college during the 1990s from a respected professor at the University of Warsaw. Suddenly, he asked “Do you love Bandera?”. (Sobień-Górska 2020: 211)

Tetiana Oleksiienko in her autobiographical story *Lekcje przetrwania*, submitted to “My first and one-hundred-first day in Poland” contest, wrote the following observation:

Volhynia became an invisible specter, a gnawing conscience, which devoured me everyday. Regardless of the company I found myself in, sooner or later, when the alcohol became coursing through my veins, someone uttered the word “Volhynia” and my hands began to feel the imagine salty dampness. (Oleksiienko 2023a: 103)

The Polish “wide audience” does not perceive the Volhynia massacre as a local matter (the mass murders took place in Volhynia and parts of Eastern Galicia) and holds all Ukrainians, regardless of their place of origin, collectively responsible. Thus, a resident of Lviv or Donetsk could be considered a supporter of Bandera. Tens of thousands of Polish-Ukrainian talks that took place in the Republic of Poland in recent years, with only a few—like those quoted above—recorded one way or another, have become despite the failure of the ruling and intellectual elites, a bottom-up tool for reworking Polish trauma of Volhynia. Each questioned Ukrainian and every questioned Ukrainian woman talked about their attitude to the Volhynian massacre to the extent that their own experience, knowledge and emotions allowed them. Although one can see the positive effects of this sui generis migration diplomacy (undoubtedly, convivial contact with Ukrainian migrants was one of the factors of the solidarity uprising of Poles after the Russian Federation’s aggression against Ukraine on February 24, 2022), one should note the high price paid for them by one from the parties. The Polish trauma of Volhynia began to crumble and disintegrate into thousands of private traumas of Ukrainians.

As a refusal to accept the above rules of Polish-Ukrainian communication sound the words of Oksana Czerkaszyzna from the aforementioned *Lwów nie oddamy*: “And the first question: are you a Banderite? – Uninteresting! – Question two: is Bandera your hero? – Uninteresting” (Szyngiera et al. 2018).

Later in the play, Czerkaszyzna consistently deconstructs the image of a “true Ukrainian woman,” making the viewers aware that its exclusive character also results in numerous exclusions in Ukraine itself:

I’m playing here for you a real Ukrainian, although I’m not treated like a real Ukrainian in Ukraine, because I was born in Charków and I’ve spoken Russian since I was a child. But I’ve felt like a Ukrainian until today. For the first time I found out that I’m a Banderite when the war broke out in 2014 and in Russian media there was news that a boy was crucified and then eaten in Ukraine. Those responsible were Banderites... I’ve worked through this already. As a Ukrainian, I’m ready to talk about the terrorism of OUN-UPA, about Bandera, even if Ukrainians need him psychologically because of the war. And I’m ready to talk about how genocide really was committed by Ukrainians against Polish people in Volhyn. (Szyngiera et al. 2018)

In recent years, in addition to the Polish-Ukrainian dialogue, an interesting multidimensional Ukrainian-Ukrainian dialogue has been taking place in Poland. It mainly concerns the relations between the Ukrainian minority and Ukrainian migrants. These two groups do not constitute a homogeneous community. The Ukrainian minority is mostly descended from people who resettled as part of Operation Vistula carried out by the communist authorities in 1947. During the National Census, 38,797 people declared membership (*Ukraińcy* 2022). Ukrainian migrants, on the other hand, are people who have been coming to Poland since the 1990s most often for economic purposes. Subsequent economic crises, and above all the aggressive policy of Russia, resulted in the intensification of migration movements from Ukraine. Ultimately, on the eve of February 24, 2022, about 1.4 million Ukrainian citizens were said to reside in Poland (Bukowski, Duszczyk, ed. 2022: 24).

Through the decades of living in the post-war reality of the People’s Republic of Poland and the first years of the Third Republic of Poland, the Ukrainian minority developed networking strategies in the form of festivals, watras [bonfires], malankas and concerts, which stemmed from the dispersion of people and were aimed at strengthening communal bonds and counteracting assimilation. This group is characterized by their attachment to tradition, places of origin,

memory of displacement, their focus on the Orthodox church and the use of dialects of the Ukrainian language. The members of this group have their own codes with which they define themselves and the models of “Ukrainianness” and patriotism (Trzeszczyńska 2021:73).

Interactions between the Ukrainian minority and migrants from Ukraine became more and more frequent after 1989, resulting in the need to confront the imaginary image of the homeland, which as a result of the many years of isolation took on idealized features, with the real country, which struggled with the negative effects of the post-totalitarian transformation. Oleg Krysztopa’s reportage *Останні українці* (The Last Ukrainians) from 2019 described a number of fears experienced by the Ukrainian minority in Poland. These are fears related not only to the traumatic past (one of the people interviewed, who returned to his native village after 30 years of emigration in Canada, built his house by the forest so that Poles would not hear what is being said in it), but also to being seen as a newcomer from Ukraine, whose many years of dedication to preserving his identity, sometimes even leading to family conflicts, may be considered obsolete. “Just don’t be too hard on us,” the reporter quotes from one of the first conversations (Krysztopa 2019: 16).

Ołeh Krysztopa is the author of one of the parts of the publishing series *Ліхіє дев’яності* (The Bad Nineties), in which he describes the first years of political transformation in his native Ivano-Frankivsk. The reportage begins with a scene in which the author’s father hides from bandits who are chasing him for debts. At the same time, on the other side of the border, Orest Steć, the hero of *The Last Ukrainians*, dreams of Ukraine as “a country where the sun shines differently than here in Poland, where there is no crime, where the best people are” (Krysztopa 2019: 151).

The fear of meeting a newcomer from parts of Ukraine that have been up to now inaccessible is related not only to the fear of being judged by him, but also of his own disappointment and the need to verify the myth of Ukrainian “glass houses.” Defensive mechanisms can take aggressive forms, sometimes reinforced with a sense of class superiority growing out of an aversion to guest workers. They, in turn, perceive the Ukrainian minority as “satiated,” that is, having a Polish passport and not knowing “what it means to feel the uncertainty of tomorrow, to struggle with bureaucracy, to be exposed to harassment at the Office for Foreigners” (Trzeszczyńska 2021:43).

Maciupa in the drama *Pilka leci na wschodni brzeg* (Ball Flies to the Eastern Shore) shows the above conflict in the image of a woman from the borderlands who is hated by petty smugglers, but who also turns out to be of Ukrainian origin. In one of the scenes, this woman addresses the people she is searching for:

Who are you? Bandits! Smugglers! You only know how to scam. Vodka, cigarettes for 10 zlotys and going to Biedronka to buy washing powder. Do you know at least one Ukrainian song? They pretend to be victims, but I know what it means to be a victim, what it means to conceal my real identity even in the third generation, what it means when your grandmother doesn't accept any one of your boyfriends because they are Polish. And you? Who are you? You don't speak Polish, Russian, you only have a Ukrainian passport. And what is that worth? I have a Polish passport, but I'm a better Ukrainian than all of you put together. You all came here from your wild steppes. Do you go to church? (Maciupa 2021)

The dispute over the essentialist model of a "true Ukrainian" is also taking place among Ukrainians in Poland. In addition to adding to the workforce, migrants also bring with them a cultural memory (Warakomska 2019: 41). The anthropologist Patrycja Trzeszczyńska writes about discussions in which the right to "Ukrainianness" is denied to those whose ancestors served in the Red Army or come from Russian-speaking families. Some representatives of the Ukrainian national minority working in schools with Russian-speaking children treat their classes as a kind of "ground work" helping the children mature into "Ukrainianness" (Trzeszczyńska 2021: 78).

Thus, following Hanna Gosk, nothing is neutral in the migration experience (Gosk 2021: 234). The effort needed to fight for economic well-being is accompanied by the struggle of having to deal with the gazes of natives who, in order to reduce the discomfort caused by the presence of newcomers, want to portray them according to their own criteria and expectations.

For several years, voices of Ukrainian artists have become increasingly distinct in Polish culture, which has an opportunity in the near future to become a space of interculturality, in which the admitted differences between these cultures will cease to generate conflicts and new traumas. Fueled by pseudo-historical accusations, the Russian attack on Ukraine only allows us to realize the significance of this opportunity.

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| Abstract

RYSZARD KUPIDURA

Representing the Ukrainian Migration Experience: From a Cultural Monologue Towards Interculturality

The text is devoted to literary, theatrical and film representations of the Ukrainian migration experience in Poland. The author notes that current artistic strategies, contrary to the intentions of Polish writers/artists, often reinforce stereotyping patterns of reception of the Other and unconsciously postulate an essentialist project of portraying a "real Ukrainian woman/man." On the other hand, Ukrainian voices are increasingly heard in Polish space, which provides an opportunity not only to work through painful traumas from the past, but, due to the constant presence of Ukrainian co-residents, also to develop competences in recognizing mutual cultural codes, which in turn creates an opportunity to avoid generating new traumas in the

future. The author devotes separate attention to the multidimensional Ukrainian-Ukrainian dialogue taking place in recent years in the territory of Poland, in other words, to the relations between the Ukrainian minority and Ukrainian migrants.

Keywords: migration, imagology, trauma, theater, cinema, Polish-Ukrainian relations

| Bio

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