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Temporalities—Technologies—Transgressions: Notes On Contemporary Slovak Poetry¹

1. No Time Like the Present

When it comes to defining zones and mechanisms of centrality and peripherality, both theories of globalisation (Huebner et al., LeBel, Rosa) and models of world literary processes (Casanova, Moretti) consider temporal differences between locales crucial. Indeed, “being in the now” is perhaps the single most important prerequisite for ‘going global’—not in the sense of an emergence of a hypothetical global monoculture, but in the sense of a culture becoming an active participant in planetary communication. For today, even an imagined return to essentialising ideals of “roots”—which are nevertheless always already woven from multitudes of (re)translations and (re)interpretations—is always in one way or another a demonstration of global events.

The current situation of global interconnectedness has been theorised by Peter Osborne as historical contemporaneity, “a coming together of different but equally ‘present’ times” (Osborne 2013: 22). In this view, there is no alternative to globalisation, since the developments in the world, especially the increased geographical mobility and the travelling of information, “have rendered the twin geopolitical imaginary of a culturalist postcolonial nationalism and a metropol-

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itan multiculturalism at best problematic and at worse redundant” (Osborne 2018: 33). For Osborne (2013: 27), it is art that “is a privileged cultural carrier of contemporaneity, as it was of previous forms of modernity” and it is solely postconceptual art that is able to have a claim on the present.

But where—in the complex relationships of contemporaneity and its artistic (re)presentation—can the poetry I intend to speak about here be positioned? In Casanova’s (86) view, literature, because of its deeper involvement of language and, by extension, cultural history and the construction of identity, “remains the most conservative of the arts, which is to say the one that is the most subject to traditional conventions and norms of representation.” It is also true that, as Skrebowski asserts, literature, unlike art, never underwent a full conceptual mutation and it is usually “good writing” as craft combined with a topical theme that dominates the discussions and directs the flow of symbolic (and monetary) capital. However, on turning to poetry, one encounters much stronger elements dragging the field away from the gravitational pull of traditional aesthetic criteria. Poetry in its visual, concrete, sound, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E and other radically innovative varieties, including the most recent one—(post)conceptual writing—much more readily resonates with Osborne’s outline of postconceptual contemporaneity and the position of art(s) within it. This poetry, it seems, does not interact with the present through the medium of what is commonly understood as literature. Depending on the definition of literature with respect to its (non)conservatism, there are basically two extreme positions to which this line of thought can lead us: either (radically innovative) poetry is not literature and thus approaches the status of “not literature” as poetry and its works are generic instances of art and are not divided into visual, literary, etc.,² or such writing is *the* literature in the sense of being the best representative of the art in question as opposed to writing that adheres to conservative, conventional, traditional norms.³ It is not my aim to make any argument in favour of either view, since both enable me to extract the poetry I would like to discuss in the following from the restricting dependence on the sociological and aesthetics-related aspects of (ordinary) literature and conceptualise it in terms of the globalised present of contemporaneity. The position of this poetry—as either the best representative of literature and an example to be followed or a generic instance of contemporary art which, in Osborne’s view, can only be postconceptual—is

2 Here I draw on Skrebowski’s understanding of conceptual art as “not music,” “not cinema,” “not dance,” etc. as art.

3 Here I draw on Douglas Robinson and his discussion of literary translation.

therefore, like art, defined by its direct relationship with contemporaneity and the postconceptual condition:

[T]he idea of a postconceptual condition is double-coded. It is determined at once as an artistic situation and that which conditions it—primarily, that interplay of communications technologies and new forms of spatial relations that constitute the cultural and political medium of economic processes of globalization, the experience of which (when successful) it artistically condenses, reflects and expresses. (Osborne 2018: 21)

Postconceptual art is then determined and enabled by the *interplay of communications technologies and new forms of spatial relations* and, at the same time, it is “construed in such a way as to register the fundamental mutation of the ontology of the artwork carried by [the legacy of conceptual art]” (2018: 20) while “inter- and transnational characteristics of an art space have become the primary markers of its contemporaneity” (Osborne 2013: 27). While the first three aspects of postconceptual art can with no hesitation be transplanted onto thinking on postconceptual poetry,⁴ it is the fourth one that needs to be addressed with greater caution, for two reasons. First, a hypothetical inter- or transnational poetry space has to be differentiated from the more traditional views of world literature (Ďurišín) or of the international literary space (Casanova xii). For, if a truly inter- and transnational space exists, it has to be the primary context in which the value of the work is created, unmediated by the constructions of national literature. Second, the barrier created by the deeper immersion of poetry in language also has to be taken into account. The language of a hypothetical genuine transnational poetry space then has to be global (i.e. it has to be English), and while it is true that the worldwide festivalisation and the strong presence of internet-based publishers, poetry magazines and other digital exhibition places and practices do contribute to the creation of such a space, it is not as developed as in the arts and, as a result, not all contemporary postconceptual poetry is necessarily at home in the transnational space.

With that said, let us move to Slovak poetry’s jump into contemporaneity in the 1990s and the subsequent consolidation and differentiation of its “now” in the first two decades of the new century.

4 In using the term postconceptual, I draw on Osborne as well as Skrebowski.

2. The Prequel

“Nowadays, more than ever before, time is crumbling, hand in hand with reality,” noted the prominent contemporary Slovak poet Michal Habaj (Habaj, Belková 4) after the end of the decade that brought radical changes to all spheres of social and individual existence.⁵ From Osborne’s outline (2013: 18–22), it follows that of the three periodisations of contemporary art—art after 1945, art since the 1960s and art after 1989—the third is most relevant from the global perspective and from the perspective of Central and Eastern Europe specifically. However, while conceptualisations of contemporary Slovak literature, typically understood as post-1989 literature, partially address the global tendencies that make up the contemporary as Osborne sees it, they more intensely focus on local events and inflections. With respect to the first decade after the fall of state socialism (and stepping into Osbornian contemporaneity), narratives of literature in Slovakia mainly underscore its “hindered plurality” (Zajac 76), i.e. the internal social and cultural schizophrenia resulting from the co-existence (most markedly from 1993 to 1998) of both the newly-re-gained artistic freedom *and* discriminatory nationalist cultural politics. And there is a good reason for focusing on the local politics in this respect—the situation it created clouded and distorted the re-entry of the cultural space into global relations. But as the observation made by Habaj together with the poetry of the period confirms, some of the factors mentioned by Osborne did make their way into poetry. The most significant of these was the massive influx of mass media discourses as carriers of capitalism marked by quite alien temporality. The combination of the local political situation and the global trends resulted in peculiar forms of re-creating the autonomous literary space recovering from the totalitarian regime and its further hybridising existence. One of them is the fact that a central position in this process was held by a strong current of radically innovative poetry in the modernist and avant-garde tradition, inspired by conceptual art and labelled as the text generation (Šrank 2000). The explicit subversiveness of their poetic practices was, in part, a result of the paradoxical political and cultural situation of the 1990s: although one was suddenly free to found a small press and print virtually whatever one wished, state funding was reserved for the chosen, ideologically suitable few (Šrank 2015: 30–31). The near monopolisation of the public communication space by the newly-emergent commercial mass media affected the poetry interested in participating in the present and, combined with inspirations found in poetry, arts and post-structuralist philosophy, resulted in the specific forms

5 Unless stated otherwise, all translations from Slovak are mine.

that the outlined subversiveness took. The flooding of the verbal and visual public (and private) spaces by mediated contents brought a de-realisation of reality that resulted in a departure from the use of “natural speech” similar to the shift in North American poetry in the 1970s observed by Marjorie Perloff. As she argued, the mass media had become the main source of “natural language,” and “common speech” had therefore come to be “always already mediated by a third voice, the voice of the media” (47), which prompted the advance of a poetry that “emphasizes its medium as being constructed, rule governed” (Bernstein 40). A sudden distrust of the authentic that built up during the 1990s in the Slovak cultural space led to a comparable use of radically innovative practices in the poetry of the text generation. Its prominent participation in the re-establishment of the autonomous literary field resulted in its acquiring a substantial amount of cultural capital, which to a great extent shaped the landscape of Slovak poetry in the first two decades of the new millennium.

3. The Now

A look at the poetry scene in Slovakia suggests that contemporaneity, with its new forms of spatial relationships and speed of information, people and capital flow, was more robustly acknowledged by Slovak poetry in the first decades of the twenty-first century. Mass computerisation and internetisation, increased personal mobility and a growing number of Slovak speakers of English resulted in a more intimate involvement of poetry in globally distributed news, fashions, tastes and attitudes, which were less and less curated by local media agents (see Šrank 2015). This, combined with the increasingly festival-based promotion and reception of poetry and the growing degree of European political integration that systematically supports cultural exchanges via various EU-funded programmes, prompted the gradual appearance of Central European inter- and transcultural poetry space(s). Thanks to the combination of local and international developments in poetry, most of the poets who in one way or another work with temporal differences and participate in new forms of poetry production and circulation also take into account—albeit to varying degrees—the conceptual mutation. However, other poetries, less concerned with the contemporary, have co-existed along with these contemporary poetic practices, in Osborne’s (2013, 2018) sense of contemporaneity. The sum of poetry that has enjoyed the greatest amount of critical attention has been analysed in greatest complexity by Jaroslav Šrank:

Most works from around the turn of the millennium can be delineated along four lines of development that convey the differences and similarities between the activities of poets and poetics since around the end of the 80s. The first two, the poetry of non-conformist individualism and the poetry of the private, were still formed under the conditions of the Communist regime. In the 90s, another two strains were born: first spiritual poetry, and then the experimental-deconstructive avant-garde. (2015)

It is the last of the four tendencies that acknowledged contemporaneity. In the following outline, I will take a look at its forms.

The reintroduction of non-traditional literary practices in the 1990s was at first met with mixed critical reaction, but later it was widely—though by some only reluctantly and retrospectively—acknowledged as “the only tendency that truly was a product of the epoch” (Šrank 2013: 54) and gained a substantial amount of symbolic capital. Nevertheless, in the new century, conventional literary forces have been continually making an effort to drag postconceptual poetry back to the territory of literature and historicise it by discursively marking all conceptual procedures—regardless of their form and innovative or interpretive potential—as dated. An important factor in this respect was the reinstating of state patronage (Lefevre) to virtually all writing, which effectively meant that state cultural politics and contemporary poetry were brought much closer together and started influencing each other. With some minor exceptions, these partial factors led to a higher degree of referentiality and a keener interest in local identity and history in that part of poetry that made sure it would succeed in receiving book grants, or, alternatively, to a search of other sources of funding and legitimisation in those strands of poetry that were not willing to comply and (still) insisted on radical attacks on the defining limits and/or the (identity-representing, population-educating) functionality of literature.⁶ These poetics shifted either towards stronger forms of postconceptualism with institutional critique and an exploration of possibilities of escaping literature as institution at their core or towards radical inter- and transmediality, fully conversant with digital and electronic writing and concerned with the aesthetic remainder.

The trajectories of the oeuvres of individual authors like Michal Habaj (b. 1974) and Katarína Kucbelová (b. 1979), marked by a gradual increase in referentiality and interest in relations between social spaces endowed with different

6 This mostly, but not exclusively, concerned the younger poets.

temporalities, are to a great extent coincident with the overall movement of post-2000 Slovak poetry as literature. The urge to (re)present the now as a paradoxical disjunctive unity of incongruous layers of temporalities, carrying in themselves separate but interconnected sets of identities, values and (self)definitions, can be glimpsed in texts like Kucbelová's (2016) "A Greenhouse Poem," in which

environments on the huge screen mingle
and fill the house with tropical perfumes and flavours
.....
the indoor vegetation rises into the heights and creeps
up the heaps of useless things
.....
outside, the dry land blends with the grey-brown roughcast
but only for a little less than a second

The mediated *tropical* virtual realities—perhaps a wildlife documentary, an advertisement using exotic imagery or, more generally, any footage bearing alien temporalities—flow into a space marked by remnants of the socialist era, most explicitly signified by the reference to a local type of *roughcast*. The realities mix and hybridise in the overgrowth of *indoor vegetation* and the image of the absent but fathomable viewer—the inhabitant of the house full of *useless things*, a human remnant of socialism who lets himself/herself be forgotten in the spectacle media engineered for him/her. Temporalities are unified, but at the same time irreconcilable—blended *only for a little less than a second*. With its overflow of the sensual stimuli, the poem also illustrates the way this line of writing works with the aesthetic remainder—parodying the aestheticisation, but at the same time using its effects. By being contemporary and respecting literary values, this poetry also aspires to a more central position in the Casanovian world literary field and attracts a plethora of emerging authors, most of whom, however, fail to account for the conceptual mutation and fully adhere to the model of poetry as (lyrical) literature instead (see Želinský).

By abandoning the restricting and conventionalising literary values, the more strongly postconceptual poetry and the poetry exploring various (non-)materialities often risk having to look for financing from sources other than the government. That, however, need not be a disadvantage—the writing that intensely engages with the digital and explores the aesthetic remainder in inter- and transmedial projects gains a stronger motivation to abandon the (Slovak) language and is able to more readily gain recognition in inter- and transcultural poetry spaces. This is most notably the case with Zuzana Husárová

(b. 1983), whose performances and (often collaborative) projects have elicited interest not only at the European but also at the transatlantic level (Peková).

The works that are little interested in the aesthetic remainder and conventional literariness, and whose authors have not embraced the performative and self-promoting dimension of the contemporary poetry scene either, find themselves in a different position. Instead of negotiating for a space with conventional literariness or finding audiences through digitally absorbing performances, this poetry concentrates on challenging recipients' interpretive limitations and insists on its thorough perpetual self-reinvention, conceptual exploratory nature and critical attitude. This line of poetry, represented by authors like Peter Macsovszky (b. 1966) and Nóra Ružičková (b. 1977), possesses perhaps the greatest potential to innovate, subvert and paradigmatically change literature and its institutions—not least by preventing poetry from ignoring the conceptual mutation. One of the strongest recurring motives in it is the critique of institutions.

To briefly illustrate this, I will turn to Ružičková's more recent projects, at times co-authored with Marianna Mlynářčiková (b. 1971). They are often concerned with the critique of the institution of exclusion and explore media-manufactured images and naming as a demonstration of power. Ružičková and Mlynářčiková's latest collaborative book project, <-abc-> (2018), investigates the relationships between the visual culture, power and logo- and anthropocentric capitalist mechanisms of commodification, fragmentation and objectification of the always already mediated experience of the world. Appropriated textual fragments are montaged into a kind of de-visualised Debordian film—a series of lighter and darker textual synapses that make visible the commonly invisible structural violence:

All rooms must be numbered with the number displayed on the door from the outside. Every room must contain an inventory. Make sure the stitches are placed evenly, the surface of the pattern has to be velvety smooth. Ask the model to slowly open and close his or her eyes so that you can inspect the shape of the eyelids. Weeding the winter crop has to be done before the stalks start to sprout, the latest time to weed the spring crop is when the stalks begin to form. (Mlynářčiková, Ružičková 2018)

In <-abc->'s dust jacket paratext, institutional critique, in its narrow sense, merges with the critique of the institution of exclusion: the blurb, which is usually used for promotional purposes and authored by personalities whose

names might increase selling rates, was written by Dana Snopková, a not very well-known actor from the Theatre from the Passage—a theatre employing intellectually disabled performers.

4. The Afterwards

General cultural determinants that influenced the post-2000 Slovak literary field included such fundamental shifts in day-to-day reality as internetisation, unprecedented general geographical mobility and the re-establishment of state patronage for small presses.⁷ At the same time, the changing socio-cultural conditions made the experience of the “global” more synchronic and intense, with world events feeling intimately connected with local ones. The peculiarities of the social, economic and political developments of the 1990s strongly formed the character of the literary field in the 1990s. In result, that part of currently published Slovak poetry that has a claim on the present is inevitably postconceptual. Its modulations seem to spring mainly from the constellation and hierarchisation of the aspects of the present it chooses to accentuate, attitudes towards conventional understandings of literature, degrees of interest in the aesthetic remainder and the emphasis placed on attracting readerships. The complexities of the development of Slovak poetry after the fall of state socialism show that globalisation forces are seldom straightforward and target locales are never simply passive recipients of the formats and contents that are catered to them; while there is no denying that literary devices, genres and tastes have generally travelled in waves—to use Moretti’s imagery—flowing from the dominant cultures to the peripheries, the emerging trans- and intercultural communication spaces promise to at least partially disrupt these mechanisms. Contemporary (Slovak) poetry gives hope for resistance.

7 By state patronage I mean financing from public funds that—although distributed according to various sets of rules and rulings by various committees—ultimately come from the government. As Lefevre puts it, “[p]atrons try to regulate the relationship between the literary system and the other systems [and] operate by means of institutions set up to regulate, if not the writing of literature, at least its distribution: academies, censorship bureaus, critical journals, and ... the educational establishment” (15). While it would not be right to speak about the government’s or state’s direct political interference in regulating literature in Slovakia in the past two decades (especially since 2015 when the new Slovak Arts Council was established), the key according to which committees make their decisions is necessarily derived from such things as current notions of public interest or the reasonably wide reach of audiences.

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| Abstrakt

IVANA HOSTOVÁ

Temporalności – technologie – transgresje. O współczesnej poezji słowackiej

W ciągu ostatnich trzech dziesięcioleci, naznaczonych w krajach Europy Środkowej ich nagłym przemieszczeniem na mapie geopolitycznej, słowackie przestrzenie społeczne i kulturowe w wielkim pośpiechu i chaosie weszły w uwarunkowaną lokalnie relację z postmodernizmem i, mniej więcej w tym samym czasie, wkroczyły do współczesności. Przeskok do terażniejszości wywołał nieodzownie transkulturowe sposoby istnienia, w których globalny obieg informacji, mód i stylów buduje istotną część indywidualnych tożsamości. Na podstawie koncepcji historycznej współczesności autorstwa Petera Osborne'a (2013, 2018) artykuł pokrótce wymienia zmiany, które część słowackiej poezji, charakteryzowaną przez osborniańską współczesność, dotknęły w ostatnich trzydziestu latach.

Słowa kluczowe: poezja słowacka; współczesność; poezja postkonceptualna

| Abstract

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In the course of the past three decades, marked in post-communist Central European countries by their sudden repositioning on the geopolitical map,

Slovak social and cultural spaces, in great haste and chaos, got to locale-specific grips with postmodernism and, more or less simultaneously, entered contemporaneity. The leap to the present has created inherently transcultural modes of existence, in which global news, fashions and tastes form a relevant part of individuals' identities. Through the prism of Peter Osborne's (2013, 2018) concept of historical contemporaneity, this essay briefly outlines modifications that the segment of Slovak poetry marked by Osbornian contemporaneity has undergone in the past three decades.

Keywords: Slovak poetry; contemporaneity; postconceptual poetry

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