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## OTHER STORIES: EXPERIMENTAL FORMS OF CONTEMPORARY HISTORYING AT THE CROSSROADS BETWEEN FACTS AND FICTIONS

**Summary.** The process of questioning the authority of academic history—in the form in which it emerged at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century—began in the 1970s, when Hayden White pointed out the rhetorical dimension of historical discourse. His British colleague Alun Munslow went a step further and argued that the ontological statuses of the past and history are so different that historical discourse cannot by any means be treated as representation of the past. As we have no access to that which happened, both historians and artists can only present the past in accordance with their views and opinions, the available rhetorical conventions, and means of expression.

The article revisits two examples of experimental history which Munslow mentioned in his *The Future of History* (2010): Robert A. Rosenstone's *Mirror in the Shrine* (1988) and Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's *In 1926* (1997). It allows reassessing their literary strategies in the context of a new wave of works written by historians and novelists who go beyond the fictional/factual dichotomy. The article focuses on Polish counterfactual writers of the last two decades, such as Wojciech Orliński, Jacek Dukaj, and Aleksander Głowacki. Their novels corroborate the main argument of the article about a turn which has been taking place in recent experimental historying: the loss of previous interest in formal innovations influenced by modernist avant-garde fiction. Instead, it concentrates on demonstrating the contingency of history to strategically extend the unknowability of the future or the past(s) and, as a result, change historying into speculative thinking.

**Keywords:** experimental historying, counter(f)actuals, Alun Munslow, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, Lisa Lowe's "past conditional temporality", Polish counterfactual novels.

In his introduction to *Experiments in Rethinking History*, a collection of fourteen experimental pieces of historical writing, Robert A. Rosenstone states: "No writers have clung more firmly (desperately, even) to traditional forms than those academic historians whose professed aim is to accurately reconstruct the past."<sup>1</sup> In order to achieve this aim, historians kept telling the past as linear stories narrated in the third person by omniscient and transparent narrators. As Hayden White pointed out five decades ago, the stories used the well-known model of the 19<sup>th</sup> century realistic novel, with a clear sense of effects and causes, and a beginning, a middle, and an end tightly knitted together.<sup>2</sup> They kept doing this despite all the new methodologies and theoretical approaches brought by, for example, social, postcolonial, or gender studies, which emerged in the field

of historical sciences in the 1970s. The second editor of this collection, Alun Munslow, focused critically on the well-established connection between the content of the past (what happened) and the form or shape it is given (as history), simultaneously expressing his serious doubts about the widely used empirical-analytical method as the privileged path to historical knowing. However, as Munslow insisted, most historians are not so naive as not to realize that the medium is of critical importance to the message. Nevertheless, they still believe that a professional historian should necessarily be "an objective investigative reporter seeking after factual truth."<sup>3</sup> For this reason, Munslow started to conceptualize the central principle of experimental history, which, as he insisted, should confront the myth of a given past—a supposedly fully knowable

reality “back there” As he explained, there exists an unbridgeable gulf between what we write as history and that which we call the past reality, because each of them belongs to a different ontological category. He expressed it pointedly in his introduction to *Experiments in Rethinking History*: “In history the question of truth and meaning comes down to how we **represent** our sources and how the form of that representation directly affects what we think those sources ‘really’ or ‘most probably’ mean.”<sup>4</sup>

As a consequence, and, quite obviously, from today’s perspective, what we think about the past can only be understood once it has been written, therefore experiments with narrative become decisive for new forms of historying. The *Experiments in Rethinking History* collection was the best proof of that. A few years later, when writing his *Future of History*, Munslow introduced a couple of examples of such innovative forms of historying, predating the ones he and Rosenstone collected.<sup>5</sup> Even though the authors whose works he analysed—R. A. Rosenstone, Cynthia Syndor, Sven Linqvist, and H. U. Gumbrecht among others—had thoroughly researched and documented their subjects, they experimented with a number of techniques well known to modernist avant-garde fiction to reflexively address the cognitive power of the readers and the assumed objectivity of narrative. However, I would like to argue that there are other effective ways of acknowledging the nature of history as (re)presentation. What is more, the scope of these forms is not limited to the experimental techniques of self-reflexive writing inherited from modern avant-garde writers. Even the few examples of experimental writings which Munslow quoted were underlain by different agendas. These authors tried to rethink history and its epistemological status while exploring multiple meanings of the past by adopting a variety of approaches. It has become even more evident from today’s perspective of a new wave of experimental historying, which is not limited to the field of academic history. More and more writers of fiction sidestep the fictional/factual dichotomy to rethink history, as academic historians did two or three decades ago.

Therefore, in what follows, I revisit two of the works Munslow mentioned in his *Future of History* to

demonstrate how different their writing techniques and approaches to historying actually were, when looked at from today’s perspective. Then, I turn to what postcolonial scholar Lisa Lowe, exploring the links between colonialism, slavery, imperial trades, and Western liberalism, called “the past conditional temporality”.<sup>6</sup> I focus on a phenomenon which Munslow did not include into his concept of the future of history, and which is becoming increasingly more salient in historical writing of the last decade. In contemporary novels, a phenomenon similar to Lowe’s “past conditional temporality” has been more and more visible. To demonstrate the key features of this mode of historying, I focus on the highly inventive and relatively unknown to the international public Polish counter(f)actual novels. Their unique mixture of factual, mockumentary, and fictional elements demonstrates not only that history shares the same epistemological status with all (re)presentational discourses, as Munslow would have it. What is more, both experimental historical writing and the new wave of counter(f)actual novels go intentionally against the classic notion of historical time, which is based on asymmetry between the past as a circumscribed space of experience and the future as an open horizon of expectations. Accordingly, both show only one possible version of the past: that of a field beyond all changing rationalizations and legitimizations of historiography, still open to speculative thinking.

#### AGAINST THE CONVENTIONS OF NARRATIVE HISTORY

In his book *The Future of History*, Munslow argues that all experimental historians who write in the wake of the Whitean metahistorical revolution seek to respond to the past in their own particular way. To reach their aim, they have to break with most of the conventions of narrative history—factual references, historical characters or even coherently emplotted narratives. Although each experimental history is unique, it is always, as Munslow explains, the authorially constructed connection between form and content that allows for the production of a radically new way of historical understanding.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, for him Rosenstone’s *Mirror in the Shrine*,

which tells the story of American encounters with Meiji Japan, represents the most important landmark in experimental historying.<sup>8</sup> Focusing on formal innovations, Munslow emphasises the ways in which the author managed to raise questions about historical modes of representation within his narrative through the use of different voices, montage, and moving camera, direct addresses to readers and characters, and—last but not least—through self-reflexive motifs. However, there are other salient innovations which Rosenstone introduced in his *Mirror in the Shrine*, which make his history more self-aware of its artefactual nature than a conventional history dealing with the same subject would be. From today's perspective, these innovations can be called counterfactual or even counter(f)actual to stress that Rosenstone deliberately disregarded the actual expectations of his contemporary historians and their readers. For this reason, I will primarily focus on the counter(f)actuality of his book.

Three Americans, the protagonists of Rosenstone's book, chose to work in Japan and help modernize the country in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. For example, one of them, life scientist Edward S. Morse, brought the evolutionary teachings of Charles Darwin there and created the first museum of natural history. Although, in their time, all three were widely recognized as experts on Japan, their expertise and merits have since fallen into oblivion. However, Rosenstone did not stop at recalling how Americans helped modernize Japan, a topic of great interest for American readers by the end of the 1980s. Above all, he wanted to show how the three Americans strived to live in a foreign culture and understand it. In order to demonstrate the processuality and dynamics of the endeavour, as well as the subtlest shifts in perceptions, attitudes, and world-views, Rosenstone decided to intertwine three biographical tales, all constructed on meticulous academic research, even though the three protagonists had never met in person. However, in *Mirror in the Shrine*, their biographies and experiences combine into a much larger—fictional and only apparently referential—experience of meeting and negotiations with another culture. Although Munslow does not take note of it, today *Mirror in the Shrine* can be read

as a fully-fledged counter(f)actual history, even if such reading went against the author's declarations. As Rosenstone emphasizes in the introductory chapter "Prologue: Who and Why", his aim was to undermine the only seemingly lucid historical narratives and to bring them to the foreground. Even if contemporary readers easily recognize the convention of novelistic narrative used by Rosenstone, they do not necessarily have to be aware of the long-standing debate on the principles of history writing and the distinction between historical factuality and literary fiction. They may regard Japan described in the book as one of the possible worlds which are experienced as real, even if they are not true or their truthfulness cannot be easily verified. A similar shift in the modes of reading, which clearly shows its dependence on ever-changing context, is even more prominent in Gumbrecht's *In 1926*, a book which Munslow mentioned only cursorily, published almost a decade after *Mirror in the Shrine*.<sup>9</sup>

No wonder that in *The Future of History* very little space is devoted to *In 1926*. Munslow commented merely on the formal structure of the book which has a clearly anti-narrative and anti-causal format. It is composed of fifty-one cross-referenced and alphabetically ordered entries divided into three sections: "Arrays", "Codes", and "Codes Collapsed". Such arrangement asks the reader to establish her own individual reading path, to choose a beginning, a middle, and an end for this potential story. However, this and other devices, as well as self-reflexive techniques, have been employed by Gumbrecht with quite a different aim in view. In "User's Manual", which functions as a foreword, the author defines this aim in the following way: "to conjure some of the worlds of 1926, to re-present them, in the sense of making them present again."<sup>10</sup> He claims that not only is the content of his book completely referential (although not representational in the sense of depicting the past), but that he also seeks the greatest immediacy achievable through a historiographic text, so that the reader feels as if she were "in 1926". This example clearly shows that a quest for non-narrative forms of historiographic re-presentation does not have to be linked with explicit self-reflexivity and artefactuality. Indeed, Gumbrecht's

experimental writing aims at something radically different than the history writing which Munslow extensively analysed in *The Future of History*. *In 1926* goes as far as a text can possibly go in reconstructing a randomly chosen year and providing an illusion of direct experience of the past, the illusion of being-in-a-past-world. Fascinated with the materiality of everyday practices, Gumbrecht experiments with historical simultaneity, citing various voices to create an illusion of lifelike realities, which he calls “environments”, rather than linear narratives. He admits that he has chosen simultaneity as the structure of presentation of the past due to changes in historical culture which have been taking place since the late 1990s. He refers not only to films and video games but also to museum exhibitions, which have become increasingly immersive to appeal to all senses. However, in his book one can find another reason why news reporting exerted such an influence on literary styles and genres in the eponymous 1926, mostly in Germany. Reporters strived to channel their lived experience (*Erleben*), writing from the point of view of participants-observers. Some writers imitated the rapid pace of perception by depicting reality in a fragmentary fashion, carefully avoiding any profound interpretation and rational description of what they lived through (*Erfahrung*). On the one hand, Gumbrecht tries to create for the reader an illusion of direct contact with past reality, to position her as a historical witness and provide her with a direct lived experience. On the other hand, he re-presents past lived experiences with the help of fictional techniques of simultaneity worked out around 1926. Therefore, it is significant where he positions himself in relation to historians’ debates on the nature of history writing of that time.

As a matter of fact, Gumbrecht asks the same question as Munslow and his colleagues did: what can we do “with all the knowledge about the past that we preserve, publish, and teach”?<sup>11</sup> However, he does not focus so much on the artefactuality of history. Rather, he uses the encyclopaedic device of cross-references to mimic, directly or indirectly, the non-systemic character of our everyday experience. That is why in his book we can hear no authorial voice commenting on quotations from fictional and

non-fictional texts, drawing references to facts and social and cultural phenomena, or putting them in a historical perspective. Thus, Gumbrecht, contrary to Munslow, does not seem to attach much importance to the above-mentioned authorially constructed connection between form and content. Therefore, in *The Future of History* it was mainly anti-narrative techniques of *In 1926* that were mentioned, and not the author’s reason for employing them. In the final section of his book, entitled “After Learning From History” and written in academic prose, Gumbrecht explicitly voices his disagreement with the New Historicists. He is particularly critical of their focus on the ontological difference between the past and history, and their lack of desire to reach the past reality. However, as he believes, this desire underlies not only history as an academic discipline but all rationalizations and legitimizations of historiography which continuously change over time in various cultural contexts. Moreover, when the New Historicists renounce this desire, what they write “no longer differs from fiction and thus can never become a substitute for traditional historiographic discourse.”<sup>12</sup> Gumbrecht insists that if the historical culture of the 1990s wants to preserve its identity as a form of experience different from the experience of fiction, it should not seek recourse to cognitive distance, introduced through self-reflexivity. Rightly opposing the hegemony of self-reflexivity in experimental history writing, Gumbrecht nevertheless upholds the distinction between historiography and literature, based on the dichotomy between the fictional and the factual. Both historical writings and counter(f)actual novels of the last two decades proved him wrong.

#### BEYOND THE FICTIONAL/FACTUAL DICHOTOMY

Summing up his introductory arguments in *Experiments in Rethinking History*, Munslow writes: “Experimental history thus exists in the fissures between what once was and what it can mean now.”<sup>13</sup> In other words, he is primarily interested in demonstrating that a set of data does not have any discoverable meaning which one could transfer into words or other means of expression and

re-presentation. Nevertheless, he presupposes that there is always a content of data, material traces, documents, and other sources, which a historian can interpret subjectively and in various ways while including them into multiple narratives as remnants of the past or evidence. Unfortunately, as has been demonstrated since the 1970s onwards, there are many repressed voices and herstories, livelihoods and cosmologies of which no written and material traces were preserved. In those cases, neither data nor valid sources for proper historical research are available, and the ones which historians have at their disposal cannot be precisely dated or interpreted to “discover that which was”. Thus, there are no such “fissures between what once was and what it can mean now”, wherein experimental history in Munslow’s understanding could exist. At that moment alternative versions of the past started to multiply, written from the point of view of feminists as well as sexual, gendered, colored, and ethnic minorities, to name only the most salient groups. Each of these minorities have not only clearly articulated their own political issues and aims but also revealed close links between the master history narrative and different ideologies and particular interests, covered up by an ostensibly scholarly objectivity. They have also brought to the foreground their authorial, local, and partial perspectives, their geo-graphical and bio-graphical situatedness.

What is more, when narrating marginalized pasts of various minorities, historians did not always want or were able to preserve an empirical status of their narratives. The only way to actively acknowledge the loss was to provoke a confrontation with the myth of the given, so as to counterbalance forgetting and the new narratives. As I have mentioned above, in *The Intimacies of Four Continents*, Lisa Lowe, in reference to an interview with another postcolonial scholar, Stephanie Smallwood, introduced the notion of “the past conditional temporality”. In her book *Saltwater Slavery*<sup>14</sup>, Smallwood ventured an almost archaeological excavation into the Atlantic slave trade and actively acknowledged the loss of data which historians might otherwise have thoroughly researched. Commenting on this daring approach, she said in an interview: “I do

not seek to create—out of the remnants of ledgers and ships’ logs, walls and chains—‘the way it really was’ for the newly arrived slave waiting to be sold. I try to interpret, from the slave trader’s disinterest in the slave’s pain, those social conditions within which there was no possible political resolution to that pain. I try to imagine what could have been.”<sup>15</sup> The scarcity of material and archival sources, as well as an actual need for telling marginalized or entirely forgotten stories of people and their livelihoods create—as in the case of Smallwood’s *Saltwater Slavery*—narratives of the past out of absences, thanks to the work of imagination and empathy. These narratives do not obliterate the fact that they are composed out of arbitrarily selected stories which are inherently counter(f)actual, because their authors do not want to complete or supplement the master historical narrative. Quite the opposite, such historians intentionally think and narrate to counter the actual knowledge and its performative procedures, to go beyond the traditional border between fact and fiction.

The wish to go beyond the traditional border between fact and fiction characterizes not only experimental writings of historians who reconstruct histories of minorities using “the past conditional temporality”. This temporality is also important to those historians who do research on mainstream topics, for instance, history of Victorian Britain. The best examples of such historying are the works of Kate Summerscale, an English historical writer and journalist, and expert on Victorian literature. She has published, among others, *The Suspicions of Mr. Whicher* (2008) and won the British Book Award for both Popular Non-Fiction and Book of the Year.<sup>16</sup> Her book has the formulaic form of a Victorian detective novel, specifically the country-house murder mystery; at the same time, it has a rigorously and thoroughly researched historical framework. The author included in her research various archival materials, government and police files, detective novels of the period, pamphlets, newspaper pieces, police memoirs, and many other sources, gathering documents on the personal life and professional activities of the eponymous Jonathan “Jack” Whicher, one of the group of the first



eight detectives of Scotland Yard. Summerscale concentrated especially on the Road Hill Murder, committed in 1860, which engaged newspapers and public opinion on an unprecedented scale, and, consequently, was widely recognized as an instance of a detective fever, during which virtually anyone who looked for clues and sent letters to Scotland Yard and various journals acted as an investigator. No wonder that very soon the murder itself became a topic of countless novels, written by Willkie Collins and Charles Dickens among others, and supported the myth of the Victorian upper-class family which guards its secrets from both journalists and Scotland Yard detectives, i.e., representatives of the lower classes. Importantly, the book consists primarily of direct and indirect citations. The author has not only reproduced bits and pieces of Whicher's official reports, readers' letters, minutes of court sessions and private documents, but also recreated all the dialogue from testimonies given in court. Undoubtedly, *The Suspicions of Mr. Whicher*, a fine piece of work by a professional historian in the literary form of the classic detective story, is similar to Gumbrecht's *In 1926*. As I posit, both authors represent the past borrowing the form of a fictional genre which back in the day registered everyday experiences. In doing so, they subvert not only the dichotomy between the fictional and the factual but also between literature and historiography, so dear to Gumbrecht. Looking from his perspective, we have to recognize that the historical culture of the last two decades has neither preserved its identity as a form of experience different from the experience of fiction nor even wished to do so.

What should be stressed here is that, while subverting the privileged position of the master historical narrative, historying of the kind described above also puts into question the well-established definition of counter(f)actuals in historical research and writing: counter(f)actuals are still often characterized as a purely speculative and vain epistemological entertainment of otherwise serious academics. Typically, counter(f)actuals are alternative versions of the past in which one alteration in the timeline leads to a different outcome from the one that we know actually occurred. As Richard J. Evans points

out in the summary of his recent book *Altered Pasts*: "Surveying what is by now a very voluminous literature with hundreds of case studies in print, the conclusion has to be that it is most useful, and most interesting, as a phenomenon in itself, as a part of modern and contemporary intellectual and political history, worth of study in its own right, but of little real use in the serious study of the past."<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, counter(f)actuals as a cultural phenomenon are by no means restricted to such historical literature, both scholarly and non-fiction prose. There exist, for instance, many cases of recently written historical novels which not so much try to alternate the timeline as rather to—in a manner similar to the one of already cited Smallwood—actively acknowledge the loss of data testifying to the existence of a possible past reality. As I intend to demonstrate by looking closely at Polish counter(f)actual novels of the last few years, it is not a coincidence that these possible past realities are mostly shown as a product of technological inventions which have been forgotten, marginalised, unrecognised, or only potentially possible in our actual reality.

#### COUNTER(F)ACTUAL NOVELS AND HISTORICAL SELF-REFLEXIVITY

A considerable number of Polish counter(f)actual novels of the last two decades belong to typical "what if" literature. The best example of this kind is Wojciech Orliński's *Polska nie istnieje* (Poland does not exist).<sup>18</sup> The author based his alternative reality on a presupposition that, according to Karl Marx's expectations, a proletarian revolution erupted in 1877 in the USA, the richest and most industrially developed country at that time. Shortly afterwards, the revolution engulfed the whole world and, thus, irrevocably changed the timeline known to us. In consequence, Poland of 2015, a place where first fictional events take place, did not regain independence in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and remains divided between Russia, Prussia, and Austria-Hungary. The main character of the novel, Konrad Hirsch, a student of alternative Jagiellonian University, discovers however that the 1877 revolution did not play a major role in the shaping of his world. Much more important was a technological innovation which

in our world is known only from hearsay, because it was part of an enigmatic vision of Józef Maria Hoene-Wroński, Polish astronomer, mathematician, and philosopher, adherent of the Romantic messianic doctrine. According to historical sources, in a vision which came upon him in the early 1810s, he identified the ultimate structure and origin of the universe. Hoene-Wroński was a real historical figure who joined Marseille Observatory shortly before that incident but was forced to leave it after a few years, when his complex theory of the universe was challenged and dismissed as nonsense. It is precisely in this period, as Hirsch finds out in the reality alternative to ours, that Hoene-Wroński not only succeeded in creating a mathematical model of the universe. He also built a machine called prognometer which allowed him to solve integral equations and, consequently, to foresee different paths of the future. Fearing that the machine may fall into unauthorised hands, Hoene-Wroński destroyed the prototype and began to simulate lunacy. Earlier, however, he entrusted all the results of his research to a couple of colleagues from Marseille Observatory. In secret, they rebuilt the machine strictly according to his design and, from that time onwards, have kept an eye on possible ways of the world's development, undertaking an intervention to change their present when needed. As it may be expected, when Hirsch has a chance of seeing multiple paths of the future, he learns that one of its possible versions is our own history, with two great wars and multiple genocides. To avoid this future, he decides to help the French astronomers in carrying out one of the planned interventions. In Orliński's novel, the story of how Hirsch assists in the management of his present time and, consequently, the future of his world develops simultaneously and intertwines with the story of how a French astronomer intervened into the events of 1877 which led to the ultimate victory of the proletarian revolution. To understand the significance of this basic fictional strategy, we have to see it against the backdrop of the first wave of alternative stories in interwar Poland.<sup>19</sup>

It may seem peculiar that, almost immediately after Poland regained autonomy in 1918, following a period of a hundred and twenty years of political

inexistence, the first alternate-history novels critically questioned the celebratory narratives about a politically and economically independent country and its increasingly popular colonial and imperial projects. That situation was quite similar to the one described by John Rieder who analyzes novelistic visions of catastrophe typical of the climax of Britain's imperial expansion.<sup>20</sup> In the most widely read story of that period, *The Battle of Dorking* (1871), George Chesney envisioned England's ineffectual response to a surprise German invasion. Recalling the German occupation of Paris from a year before, not only was he skeptical towards his countrymen's belief in England's invincibility but also found an innovative form of expressing his convictions. Already in the first sentence of the story's introductory chapter, he set all the events in the determinate past—fifty years before. Thus, he subverted the typical strategy of the historical novel which over a century later Fredric Jameson described as “transforming our own present into the determinate past of something yet to come”.<sup>21</sup> This kind of reversal, undermining the division between historical novel and science fiction, was quite typical of Polish alternative stories in the interwar period. Such a relatively simple strategy of unmasking the national triumphalism shed light on the political and economic realities of the day but steered clear of broader reflection on history and historying. Against this backdrop, Orliński's novel, set in a Europe without independent Poland, seems quite original. The new wave of Polish historical narratives often shows a conscious management of the past and the future with the help of a special technology as a main source of action, and as the main subject of philosophical reflection on history. Another of my examples, Jacek Dukaj's thousand-page novel *Lód* (Ice), corroborates this claim.<sup>22</sup>

Just like Orliński, Dukaj created an alternative reality by changing the well-known timeline. However, he did it in a quite different way, because he did not anchor the new reality in human deeds and decisions. In this novel, a bifurcation point occurs due to the so-called Tunguska event, commonly attributed to a big meteoroid, which hit the surface of the Earth in Eastern Siberia in 1908. The impact was so great that Russian magnetometers behaved as if the

North Pole shifted to this region. In Dukaj's novel, shortly after the Tunguska event, a thick layer of ice covered the whole Siberia and a big part of Europe. This caused not only a dramatic climate change, but also undermined the very foundations of such sciences as chemistry, physics, and even metaphysics. In this alternative Europe, new kinds of beliefs, religions, and ideologies developed, because everything froze in both the literal and the metaphorical sense. For example, a dichotomy between winter and summer, central for the novel, symbolizes a contradiction between Aristotelian logic with its laws of the excluded middle and many-valued logic. Therefore, the icebound fictional world knows neither entropy nor any sort of progression. It is thanks to Nikola Tesla, a historical figure, that the world depicted by Dukaj finds a way out of the trap of winter. The Serbian engineer and inventor, who immigrated to the USA and was a contemporary of Thomas Alva Edison, became obsessed with the search for the so-called nondispersive energy which could provide an inexhaustible source of propulsion for his *perpetuum mobile*. The fictional Tesla succeeds in inventing a kind of *perpetuum mobile*, a powerful hammer which draws black energy from the very center of the frozen world. In addition, he calculates the frequency of the hammer blows which should melt not only a thick layer of ice but also the history, and make it progress again. The only one who knows how to capitalize on Tesla's machine is Benedykt Gierosławski, a student whose adventures we follow during his journey from Warsaw to Moscow, then on Trans-Siberian Railway to Irkutsk, and further into the wilderness of Siberia on a sledge with local shamans. In the last pages of the novel, he intends to use this invention to produce a manageable future, freezing and melting parts or wholes of countries and continents. This way, history should become a kind of hard science based upon solid mathematical foundations. A world without contingencies will be born: entirely determinate, predictable, and fully subjected to human control. Thus, the future will become as rigid as is the past narrated by historians who follow causal logic in order to reconstruct the past.

By contrast, Aleksander Głowacki in his novel *Alkaloid* (Alkaloid) presents a reality analogous to our

world only in order to open a horizon of numberless, simultaneously existing possible worlds.<sup>23</sup> The story begins in the 1870s in the Zulu country and moves to Hong Kong, where the British Empire hopes to take over the production and trade of the world's most desired drug. Then the narrative takes us to Russia devastated by the communist revolution and ends in Scandinavia in a distant future. The eponymous alkaloid, called alka, is a mighty drug produced from a plant called bushman's tuber, endemic to the Zulu country. As the drug broadened human consciousness and increased intelligence, it enabled the creation of daring technological innovations which our reality does not know. Moreover, the production and trade of alka was monopolized which gave the one who knows the formula enormous political and economic power. The novel reads as an allegory of a competition for natural resources in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. All the more so that the protagonist of the novel is merchant Stanisław Wokulski, a figure borrowed from *Lalka* (The Doll), a canonical Polish novel of manners from the late 1880s, in which he was a fictional embodiment of capitalist trade. The author of that novel, Aleksander Głowacki, published it under the pen name of Bolesław Prus. The author of *Alkaloid* repeated his gesture and used the real name Głowacki as his own pen name. This move is indicative of how the novel moves a step further beyond the factual/fictional dichotomy than the two Polish novels discussed before did—not only does it combine historical and fictional figures but also treats fictional characters as historical persons. Moreover, it presents a significantly different understanding of the past and history.

As the story develops, Wokulski every now and again thinks about how disastrous his idea has been: to give humankind an instrument of technological progress at the cost of becoming a hegemon and enslaving people thanks to the power of alkaloid. Towards the end of the novel, he decides to travel to faraway future only to return to the very moment when the story began in the Zulu country. Significantly, on his way back, he stops at every key juncture of the story to multiply the possibilities of how a given event might develop. In a sense, it is reminiscent of the reversal of the strategies typical of the



historical novel of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, as described by Fredric Jameson in the article mentioned above. However, in this case Głowacki's protagonist does not look from the future at the present to change it into the determinate past of something yet to come. Quite the contrary, he does it in order to make as many indeterminate pasts as possible and to uncover the inherent contingency of historying. The novel ends with an image of Wokulski who, holding a cup with the first dose of alkaloid in hands, hesitates whether he should gulp it down or throw it away. This image reads as an invitation to morph linear, causal historical narrative into many possibilities as he did. Thus, *Alkaloid* demonstrates more clearly than the two other novels that counter(f)actuals written in an "as if" mode have replaced the earlier alternate histories that operated as "what ifs" in order to unmask the workings of the master narrative of history. The counter(f)actual novels do not show one point of bifurcation and an alternative profiled by the master narrative but many possible versions of the same historical moment—a Borge-sian garden of forking paths.

#### TOWARDS HISTORYING AS SPECULATIVE THINKING

In the present article, I have revisited Munslow's, Rosenstone's, and Gumbrecht's ideas to demonstrate a new critical perspective on the dichotomy between the academic and experimental historying that they developed in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Historical narratives written by historians and novelists in the last two decades have introduced new perspectives on the past. These new counter(f)actuals changed their focus in comparison with their predecessors in a manifest way. They do not give the past and history a different status but rather introduce a possibility of existence of different pasts marginalized or fully neglected because of the widely-accepted means of conceptualizing and understanding the past. That a successful subversion of the border between fiction and factual knowledge is possible and fruitful was proven already by such works as Smallwood's *Salt-water Slavery* or Głowacki's *Alkaloid*. Not only do they go beyond the factual/fictional dichotomy, but also make use of the inherent potential of the "as if"

modality which has been widely employed in various media and cultural contexts since the early 1990s. For example, this modality proved itself socially and artistically effective in a politically driven cultural movement that combined art, experimental media, and political activism in a distinctly performative manner, like, for instance, did the Situationists and Fluxus before them. It was identified and called "the tactical media movement" by a group of artists and theorists based in Amsterdam. The movement used the "as if" modality to invent a reality that does not exist yet by acting as though a change has already taken place. Their agenda can be illustrated by such works as Ian Alan Paul's *The Guantanamo Bay Museum* or Maia Gusberti's *How Much of This Is Fiction*.<sup>24</sup> Although the novels mentioned in my article are not politically engaged in a similar way as works of the tactical media movement, they employ a comparable method; they not so much want to create an alternate history as rather morph it in order to invent many possible historical pasts. If we come back to the question raised by Gumbrecht of how to learn from history today, we must answer that it is possible under one condition: that historying should turn into speculative thinking. The unlocking of the potential of contingency in history will lead to getting rid of the burden of the determinate past and opening a space in which fiction can serve as a legitimate method of both activism and research, of inventing and probing of new realities.

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- <sup>4</sup> Ibid., 7.
- <sup>5</sup> Alun Munslow, *The Future of History* (London, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 182–201.
- <sup>6</sup> Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 40–41.
- <sup>7</sup> Munslow, *The Future of History*, 168–182.
- <sup>8</sup> Robert A. Rosenstone, *Mirror in the Shrine. American Encounters with Meiji Japan* (Cambridge, London: Harvard University Press, 1988).
- <sup>9</sup> Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *In 1926. Living at the Edge of Time* (Cambridge, London: Harvard University Press, 1997).
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid., x.
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid., 411.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid., 417.
- <sup>13</sup> Munslow, "Introduction", 11.
- <sup>14</sup> Stephanie Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery. A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 2008).
- <sup>15</sup> Quoted in Lowe, *The Intimacies*, 40.
- <sup>16</sup> Katherine Summerscale, *The Suspicions of Mr. Whicher: The Shocking Murder and the Undoing of a Great Victorian Detective* (London: The Walker Books, 2008).
- <sup>17</sup> Richard J. Evans, *Altered Pasts: Counterfactuals in History* (London: Little, Brown, 2014), 176.
- <sup>18</sup> Wojciech Orliński, *Polska nie istnieje* (Warszawa: Narodowe Centrum Kultury, 2015).
- <sup>19</sup> An informative anthology of alternative short stories and excerpts of novels of that period appeared recently, see *Śniąc o potęgę*, ed. Agnieszka Haska and Jerzy Stachowicz (Warszawa: Narodowe Centrum Kultury, 2012).
- <sup>20</sup> John Rieder, "Visions of Catastrophe" in *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), 123–156.
- <sup>21</sup> Fredric Jameson, "Progress versus Utopia, or, Can We Imagine the Future?" in *Archaeologies of the Future: Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fiction* (New York: Verso, 2005), 152.
- <sup>22</sup> Jacek Dukaj, *Lód* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2007).
- <sup>23</sup> Aleksander Głowacki, *Alkaloid* (Warszawa: Powergraph, 2012).
- <sup>24</sup> See *Fiction as Method*, ed. Jon K. Shaw and Theo Reeve-Evison (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2017).

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Robert A. Rosenstone, "Introduction: Practice and History" in *Experiments in Rethinking History*, ed. Alun Munslow and Robert A. Rosenstone (New York: Routledge, 2004), 1.
- <sup>2</sup> See Hayden White, *Metahistory. The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1973).
- <sup>3</sup> Alun Munslow, "Introduction: Theory and Practice" in *Experiments*, 11.

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## KITOKIOS ISTORIJS: EKSPERIMENTINĖS ŠIUOLAIKINIO ISTORIZAVIMO FORMOS FAKTŲ IR FIKCIJŲ KRYŽKELĖJE

### Santrauka

1970 m. suaktyvėjusio akademinės istorijos autoriteto kvestionavimo pagrindas – XIX a. užgimęs abejojimas autoritetu. Šis 1970 m. įvykęs proveržis siejamas su Haydenu White'u, pabrėžusiu retorines istorinio diskurso dimensijas. Pažymėtina, jog jo britų kolega Alunas Munslow, teigdamas ontologinį praeities ir istorijos statusą esant tokį

skirtingą, jog istorinis diskursas jokių būdu negali būti traktuojamas tik kaip praeities reprezentacija, pasistūmėjo dar toliau. Subjektai neturi patikimos prieigos prie praeities, tad tiek menininkas, tiek istorikas gali pristatyti ir pa-  
vaizduoti praeitį, grindžiamą tik jų požiūriu ir nuomone, galimomis retorinėmis konvencijomis ir išraiškos būdais. Straipsnyje dar kartą apžvelgiami du eksperimentinės istorijos pavyzdžiai, kuriuos Munslo mini *The Future of History* („Istorijos ateitis“, 2010) – tai Roberto A. Rosenstone *Mirror in the Shrine* („Atspindys šventovėje“, 1988) ir Hanso Ulricho Gumbrechto *In 1926* („1926-aisiais“, 1997). Ši analizė leidžia iš naujo įvertinti autorių literatūrinės strategijas, kurios įveikšamos naujosios bangos istorikų ir rašytojų darbų kontekste, neapsiribojančių fiktyvia / faktine dichotomija. Pažymėtina, kad straipsnyje daugiausia dėmesio skiriama paskutinių dviejų dešimtmečių lenkų kontr(a)faktinės literatūros atstovams – Wojciechui Orlińskiui, Jacekui Dukaj ir Aleksanderiui Głowackiui. Jau minėti autorių romanai patvirtina pagrindinį straipsnio argumentą – neseniai įvykęs eksperimentinio istorizavimo posūkis lėmė, kad istorizuojant daugiau nesižavima formaliomis naujovėmis, kurioms įtaką darė modernistinė avantgardo fikcija. Taigi eksperimentiniu istorizavimu demonstruojamas istorijai būdingas atsitiktinumas, taip siekiant strategiškai praplėsti ateities ar praeities nepažįstamumą, kartu istorizavimą keičiant ir į spekuliatyvų mąstymą.

**Reikšminiai žodžiai:** eksperimentinis istorizavimas, kontr(a)faktinis, Alunas Munslo, Hansas Ulrichas Gumbrechtas, Lisa Lowe, praeities suformuotas laikinumas, kontr(a)faktiniai lenkų romanai.

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