

DOCUMENTARY NARRATIVES IN POSTMODERN TIMES: THE UNITED STATES AND SLOVENIA

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American and European cultural and, more specifically, literary trends seldom run in parallel. There are clearly identifiable distinctions of a qualitative and quantitative nature. The documentary narratives, be they in the form of literary journalism or documentary (or nonfiction) novels,¹ that this study examines are no exception. The primary focus of this article is longer American and Slovene documentary narratives since the 1960s. Slovene documentary fiction broadly falls in two categories: documentary novels can either be seen and interpreted as examples of historiographic metafiction, with modernistic and postmodernistic bases, or as documentary novels with an accentuated traditional, realistic base. The second type seems to prevail. In this comparison I am positing an indirect influence of American documentary narratives on the Slovene, not a direct transfer of techniques.

Documentary novels represent a hybrid genre that blurs fact and fiction and incorporates various other genres, ranging from travel narratives to autobiographical accounts and memoirs. Documentary narratives display verifiable links to the empirical world and simultaneously are products of the author's imagination, subjective interpretation, and moreover, the techniques of fiction-writing, such as character development, point of view, and handling of dialog. What connects these texts with the concept of postmodernity is predominantly the idea of inconclusiveness, the notion of incompleteness that permeates their ontological base. They turn away from the totalizing world of ultimate truth and definitive answers, and portray a pluralistic reality.

The documentary novel that entered the American literary scene, in an updated variant,² during the tempestuous 1960s was accompanied by the

¹ Both terms, nonfiction novel and documentary novel, are appropriate to describe works that read like novels but are based on facts documented by the author. Both terms denote a novel version of nonfictional events.

² Stories that combine fact and imagination are hardly a new phenomenon and have a considerable history in Anglo-American literature: Defoe, Dickens, Twain, and later Dreiser, Dos Passos, Doctorow, and Styron could well fit this profile. Moreover, features such as plural truths and relativization of truth and reality do not represent a real novelty in narrative discourse. These traits are found in such works as Cervantes' *Don Quixote* and Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, for example.

emergence of the journalistic-literary (essentially American) phenomenon of New Journalism. In addition to the synchronicity that connects the two phenomena in question, the most obvious correlation between them is their use of documentation (verifiable links to the empirical world) as well as the ways in which they resort to the fictitious.

Documentary novels and literary journalism can in fact be interpreted as a possible response to the hyperreal postmodern culture of “simulacrum,”³ displaying the same kind of *Weltanschauung* as metafiction (despite the fact that documentary narratives appear to be the exact opposite, especially due to their use of realistic narrative techniques). The fact is that contemporary documentary narratives often simulate reality; they often even distort it to a degree. Many writers whose works can be labeled as documentary novels are aware of the fact (and some openly state it—John Berendt and Norman Mailer, for instance) that their narratives can never give a completely accurate account of events, since as soon as they are narrated facts become a reflection of the author’s interpretation of reality or history. We can still call these narratives mimetic discourses, but we cannot interpret mimesis as a neutral, direct transformation of empirical reality into an art form. For whether it be a documentary or metafictional novel, there is typically a certain point of view present that shapes the reality described. In other words, we deal with a subjective interpretation of a depicted situation or event.⁴

Some of the most typical features that can serve as evidence of connectivity or overlapping between documentary narratives and metafictional texts are intertextuality, plurality of truths, self-reflexiveness of the narrative, the use of parody and irony, reliance on a prototext,

³ Our world, Jean Baudrillard tells us, has been launched into hyperspace, in a kind of postmodern apocalypse. The airless atmosphere has asphyxiated the referent, leaving us satellites in aimless orbit around an empty center. We breathe an ether of floating images that no longer bear a relation to any reality whatsoever. In hyperreality, signs no longer represent or refer to an external model. They stand for nothing but themselves, and refer only to other signs. (1998: 632; 1993).

⁴ In *The mythopoeic reality* (1976), Mas’ud Zavarzadeh interestingly claims that the only limitations that are imposed on the nonfiction novelist are that of the medium, the book; he sees the documentary novel as inclusive and non-selective, for the novelist “does not select elements of his experience in order to project a total perspective on life” (Zavarzadeh: 1976: 44). I disagree with his claim that the selection the writer makes is solely medium-imposed, not interpretatively motivated. The examples of documentary novels discussed in this article contradict Zavarzadeh’s assertion. The works that will be analyzed clearly structure documentary material and shape it according to particular needs and preferences.

deliberate anachronisms, and the tendency towards reevaluation of past events. Finally, there is the notion of the typically postmodern anti-totalizing ideology—namely, the realization that there is no ultimate closure, and no absolute truth.

The prototext can either be a historical character or a story belonging to a national literary or cultural canon. Norman Mailer, in *The armies of the night*, describes the march of intellectuals on the Pentagon to protest the war in Vietnam, which he describes as “an obscene war, the worst war the nation had even been in” (79), and Truman Capote, in *In cold blood*, uses as his prototext the murder of the Clutter family.

In the American literary-journalistic sphere, we observe how subjective journalism often spills into longer narratives, specifically into documentary novels that constantly oscillate between historical novels, crime narratives, (auto)biographies, travelogues, and political commentaries on the one hand, and journalism on the other. In his writing and in his public stance, Mailer is in line with this description of the documentary novel. To corroborate this claim, we can restate his own, succinct assertion that he did not create a thoroughgoing, true account of Gary Gilmore’s execution, portrayed in great detail (over a thousand pages) in *The executioner’s song* (1979). Mailer employs a full range of novelistic devices, especially techniques of dramatization, and at the same time recognizes and accepts the impossibility of pursuing objective truth in his writing, explaining how “two accounts of the same episode would sometimes diverge,” and that “in such conflict of evidence, the author chose the version that seemed most likely, for it would be vanity to assume he was always right” (Mailer 1998: 1051).

Prior to *The executioner’s song*, Mailer’s notable attempt at creating a nonfiction novel was *The armies of the night* (1968), subtitled *History as a novel/The novel as history*, an account of the anti-Vietnam War march in October 1967, in which Mailer himself participated.⁵ *The armies of the night* is a book of highly metaphorical literary journalism that employs a “dual,” schizophrenic narrator. Mailer uses third-person narration and a “split” narrator, Mailer the participant and Mailer the commentator. The participant deals with the external field of reference (i.e., the empirical data), while the scribe comments on the external events and reveals the participant’s inner reactions to them. Or, in Zavarzadeh’s words, “the performer immediately brings to the narrative that larger ring of the actual,

⁵ Mailer used transcripts from tapes and movies made of his own participation in the event in Washington. On the discussed Mailer’s works, see Lennon (1986: 11, 16, 79–81, 170–75) and Merrill (1992: 110–15, 153–58, 170–75).

while the private scribe registers the inner circle of subjective reality” (173). *The Armies*, the poetic quality of which sharpens the edge of Mailer’s observations and speculations, moves towards the novelistic sphere. Mailer lucidly explains in his narrative how history inhabits a “crazy-house” and that the “mystery of the events at the Pentagon,” even when reconstructed by means of newspaper reports and eyewitness accounts, can only be a “collective novel” (Foley 1986: 11).

John Berendt’s stance on writing, specifically on his story *Midnight in the garden of good and evil: A Savannah story* (1994), is reminiscent of Mailer’s. In other words, he, too, rejects Capote’s paradox, i.e., claiming to have successfully avoided any distortion of objective truth while simultaneously resorting to novelistic techniques and dramatization. This is how Berendt describes his approach to writing his famed book: “I approached the story as if it were an article for a magazine. It was nonfiction, writing using the fictional techniques novelists and short story writers would use: ample description, transitions, a lot of dialogue” (Weich 1999).

In Berendt’s book we no longer find the traditional distinction between fact and fiction, reality and play. His Savannah becomes hyperreality; its gothic scenery and grotesque characters remind the readers of those in works by William Faulkner, Flannery O’Connor, William Styron, and Alice Walker. Berendt also created a tangible picture of the dichotomy between the American North and South. Moreover, both Mailer and Berendt were equally interested in presenting a series of different perspectives, a multiplicity of points of view, which validate their narratives’ postmodern foundations.

In all probability, it is not at all coincidental that these documentary narratives first appeared in the 1960s. This was a revolutionary decade that is also recognized as an inception point of the postmodern as a unique social, political, and cultural condition, and moreover, of postmodernism, as a specific literary trend. This period has been described by some sociologists, historians, culturologists, and literary theoreticians as the early phase of late multinational capitalism, a social phenomenon that is frequently regarded as a correlate of the postmodern. It is not possible precisely to outline historical periodization of the postmodern; however, the “postmodern condition” is normally discussed together with the phenomenon of postindustrial society.⁶

⁶ Most of the theories describe postmodernism as a break with the dominant culture and aesthetics that corresponds to a new social, cultural, political, and economic moment some scholars have called the postindustrial society, others

Fredric Jameson, in his study *Postmodernism and the cultural logic of late capitalism* (1991), talks about “a radical break or coupure generally traced back to the end of the 1950s, or the early 1960s,” and explains that “the break in question should not be thought of as a purely cultural affair” (Jameson: 1, 3). Jameson, although following the Marxist line of thought, does not see the postmodern as something that blocks the development of humanism and man’s emancipation; he equates the postmodern with multinational late capitalism and sees postmodernism as its cultural correlate. Similarly, Lyotard (who in *The postmodern condition* [1979] dismissed the “grand narratives” of history) observes how “knowledge is altered as societies enter what is known as the postindustrial age and cultures enter what is known as postmodern age. This transition has been under way since at least the end of the 1950s, which for Europe marks the completion of reconstruction” (3).

We can turn to Friedrich Nietzsche at this point as well and recall that his intense suspicion of metaphysics and his radical skepticism of the conventional notions of truth⁷ no doubt exerted crucial influence on many ideologies of the postmodern as well as of postmodernism. In his essay “Post-Modernism’s Use and Abuse of Nietzsche” (2001), Ken Gemes refers to Nietzsche as being a practitioner of “the hermeneutics of suspicion” which, in fact, is Paul Ricoeur’s term.⁸ However, while Nietzsche still believed in some deeper, causally fundamental order of meaning, for the postmodernists “the notion of hermeneutics of suspicion stands for a suspicion of all levels of meaning” (Gemes 2001: 1).⁹

Let us now consider how to apply Lyotard’s idea of the “completion of reconstruction” in Europe in the late 1950s, which

the consumer society, and still others the media society or even the society of the spectacle.

⁷ Nietzsche wrote in *The will to power*: “In opposition to Positivism, which halts at phenomena and says, ‘There are only *facts* and nothing more,’ I would say: No, facts are precisely what is lacking, all that exists consists of interpretations” (Lucy 2000: 39).

⁸ Ricoeur holds that our self-understandings, and indeed history itself, are “fictional”—that is, subject to the productive effects of the imagination through interpretation. For Ricoeur, human subjectivity is primarily linguistic and mediated by symbols. He states that the “problematic of existence” is given in language and must be worked out in language and discourse. He refers to his hermeneutic method as a “hermeneutics of suspicion,” because discourse both reveals and conceals something about the nature of being. For further details on Ricoeur’s perspective, see *Time and narrative* (1983–85).

⁹ On the influence of Nietzsche’s philosophy on the birth of postmodern thought, see also Jürgen Habermas’s essay “The entry into postmodernity: Nietzsche as a turning point” (Docherty 1993).

consequently denoted the launch of postindustrial society, to “the Slovene condition.” Evidently, postmodernism and the postmodern in Slovenia do not have the same scope or precisely the same characteristics as their American correlatives. Slovene literary scholars started using the term postmodernism rather late (in the 1980s), in comparison with American situation. However, use of the word in Slovenia follows the same general timeline as other European countries.¹⁰

Furthermore, it is essential to point out that postmodernism in Slovene literature should be understood as a part (probably the most representative one) of a larger notion of the Slovene “literary postmodern,” a concept introduced by a prominent Slovene literary scholar Janko Kos in his essay “Konec stoletja: slovenska literatura v letih 1970-2000,” (End of the century: Slovene literature in the years 1970–2000) published in the journal *Literatura* (2000). This is a term denoting literary syncretism, or the merging and co-existing of various literary trends at the end of the twentieth century (including texts that could tentatively be called documentary novels, in my view). It should not be equated with the postmodern as a specific cultural, social, and political condition. Still, what binds the two concepts together is the notion of pluralism of truths and development of individual poetics.

It was not until the late 1970s that Slovene literature became more open to American literary trends and developments, consequently, becoming a part of both the European and global literary scene. To a certain degree, this helped introduce the notion of syncretism and brought about the development of freer and more diverse autopoetics in Slovene literature. Aleš Debeljak, an academic and a poet, claims in his work *Na ruševinah modernosti: Institucija umetnosti in njene zgodovinske oblike* (On the ruins of modernity: The institution of art and its historical form, 1999) that postmodernism (he sees it as a trans-literary concept) became a platform for the awakening of the liberating criticism of communism as meta-narrative. (Debeljak 1999: vii).

In addition, it ought to be noted that Nietzsche’s philosophical ideas as well as those of Heidegger and Adorno (which were also essential for the forming of the idea of the postmodern)¹¹ were introduced into

¹⁰ Tomo Virk gives a comprehensive picture of postmodernism and the postmodern in Slovenia in *Strah pred naivnostjo: poetika postmodernistične proze* (Fear of naïveté: The poetics of postmodern fiction, 2000).

¹¹ Heidegger and Nietzsche both represent the “hard practical core” of discussions on relativity of all values and they both contributed greatly to the debates on the postmodern repudiation of general and ultimate truths (Blitz 1995). Adorno’s work revolved to a large degree around the problem of modernity. However, on account of his awareness of the fundamentally problematic status of modern art

Slovene philosophical and literary spheres chiefly by Tine Hribar, a philosopher and a professor of phenomenology and philosophy of religion. Postmodern ethics, bringing the death of the transcendental signified, started gaining ground in Slovene academic circles no sooner than the late 1980s and the early 1990s. The first scholarly debates, which started in the 1980s, were mainly concentrated on the area of postmodernism in poetry.¹²

As Kos observed in “Konec stoletja,” communism delayed post-industrialization in Slovenia and this, in turn, also delayed the occurrence of postmodern cultural trends. Thus, one might question whether postmodern documentary novels have appeared in Slovenia at all, and if so, what exactly are their ontological and epistemological bases? Are the foundations of Slovene postmodern novels with their adherence to truth-claims similar to those in American novels, considering the specifics of the Slovene cultural and political situation? Such queries bring forward questions on the impact of Capote’s and Mailer’s writings in Slovenia. Reviewing the reception of the works by the two pioneer mavericks among American documentarists, and tracing the reactions to the ideas of the entire “school” of American literary journalists and nonfiction novelists, might reveal whether or not they have had any significant influence on Slovene writers at all.

Capote’s early texts (from the 1940s and 1950s) were not much discussed in Slovenia. There was, however, great curiosity about Capote in the early 1960s. In 1966, the adaptation of Capote’s novel *The grass harp* was a huge success on Broadway, as well as at the Vienna’s Volkstheater. That same year, Maila Golob translated *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* into Slovene, and later *In cold blood*, the translation of which appeared only a year later, in 1967.

Shortly after the book’s publication in Slovenia, an unnamed author highly praised *In Cold Blood* in the magazine *Knjiga* (The book). *In*

and his constant theorizing of its meaning and possibilities, Adorno’s writing bears greatly on the problem of the postmodern. Or, as Peter Osborne (1989) puts it in his essay “Adorno and the metaphysics of modernism: The problem of a ‘postmodern’ art”: “Adorno’s work provides us with a determinate set of historically grounded aesthetic categories of modernism through which to approach the question of the possibility and possible meaning of a postmodern art” (25).

¹² The first scholarly debates and writings on postmodernism and postmodernity appeared in Slovenia in the second half of the 1980s, when literary journal *Problemi-Literatura* (today known under the name of *Literatura*) started publishing translated studies on the literary and cultural phenomena. The most apparent and noteworthy Slovene theoreticians who have tackled the issues are Janko Kos, Tomo Virk, Andrej Blatnik, Aleš Debeljak, and Marko Juvan.

cold blood was described as an example of a totally revolutionary literary masterpiece in which the author manages to fuse real-life characters and scenes into a meaningful and original new whole of indisputable aesthetic value (see Klančar Intihar 2004: 44–45). The literary critic Adrijan Lah expressed a similar belief in his essay “Svet v knjigah” (The world of books) in 1969, and predicted that the book would have a huge impact on Slovene authors. Capote was noticed and there were quite a lot of positive reviews. Still, Slovene writers at that time did not aspire to take *In cold blood* as a model.

Norman Mailer was not much discussed at the time when he caused the greatest stir in the U.S. (first with the *Armies of the night* and later with *The executioner's song*). Three interviews (two with Mailer himself and one with his second wife Adele Mailer) and three articles on Mailer have been published in Slovene newspapers (none in the 1960s or the 1970s). The magazine *Teleks* published an article in 1988 that originally appeared in the German *Zeit Magazin*: “Rahlo postarani upornik Norman Mailer”¹³ (“A Slightly Aged Rebel”), Sonja Merljak Zdovc contributed an article for the Saturday supplement of the daily *Delo* in November 2007, entitled “Preveč fantastična resnica: Norman Mailer in novi žurnalizem”¹⁴ (A too fantastic truth: Norman Mailer and New Journalism) and, finally, Marcel Štefančič, Jr. wrote a eulogy, “Beli črnc: umrl je Norman Mailer” (A white Negro: Norman Mailer *has* died) in the magazine *Mladina*, also in November 2007.¹⁵ In summary, there has been no apparent direct influence of the two fathers of the documentary novel on the writings of Slovene authors.

There are few examples of literary journalism worthy of note in Slovenia. There were certain cases of journalism that included novelistic techniques in the late 1960s.¹⁶ It might be characterized as an attempt of by more democratic journalists indirectly to criticize the government, the socialist regime, and social conditions in general. The golden age of this subjective (narrative) journalism was mainly associated with the Slovene magazine *Tovariš* and lasted until the journal ceased publication in 1974,¹⁷ or rather, a year earlier, when the magazine started publishing more analytical pieces and dropped feature stories (Merljak Zdovc 2007).

¹³ *Teleks*, 14 April 1988: 40–41.

¹⁴ *Sobotna priloga*, 17 November 2007: 26–27.

¹⁵ *Mladina*, 23 November 2007: 54–56.

¹⁶ We can use the term literary journalism only tentatively, for the articles did not match the aesthetic dimension of literary journalism proper. Moreover, the articles frequently displayed a moralistic note, they were too didactic or even slipped into sensationalism at times.

¹⁷ The magazine merged with the weekly newspaper *Tedenska tribuna* and together they formed a new illustrated weekly newspaper *ITD*.

However, as Merljak Zdovc notes, neither before nor after that period, has the Slovene press published so much quality journalistic writing that includes novelistic techniques and elements of storytelling.¹⁸

Focusing on the literary sphere, we observe that genre fluidity or narrative syncretism has certainly been very much apparent on the Slovene literary scene, which, as noted, has specifics of its own. Slovene literature appears to be “burdened” with the country’s historical background. The literary works created during the last two to three decades of the twentieth century as well as those from the beginning of the new millennium avoid any clear-cut definitions or classification. We notice, however, the integration of modernist, neo-symbolist, post-realist, existentialist, and, finally, postmodernist traits into narrative fabrics. Some of these works can, indeed, by blurring the borderline between facts and fiction and demystifying the absolutistic nature of the ideological truth, be seen as approximations of the (American) documentary novel.

Janez Kajzer’s *Macesen: Roman o Ivanu Groharju* (Larch tree: A novel about Ivan Grohar, 1978)¹⁹ an account of the life of the Slovene Impressionist painter Ivan Grohar (1867–1911), is an example of a Slovene documentary novel. The author included in the book an elaborate appendix of sources which he used while writing the novel. They range from scholarly (essay and book-length) monographs on Grohar to letters written by Grohar to another famous Slovene Impressionist painter, Rihard Jakopič. Certain other of Grohar’s personal manuscripts are cited as well, and numerous well-known Slovene public figures appear in the story—writers (e.g., Zofka Kvedrova), artists (e.g., Rihard Jakopič, Matija Jama, Matija Jama, and the architect Jože Plečnik), and politicians (e.g., two mayors of Ljubljana, Ivan Vrhovnik and Ivan Hribar). Kajzer interestingly called his work “a documentary novel” and also stated that Grohar’s paintings themselves were the most important and valuable source for writing the book.²⁰

Kajzer’s book, described as a somewhat unconventional novel by some reviewers at the time of publication, has an omniscient narrator who

¹⁸ In Slovenia, according to the theory of journalistic text form as it exists in Slovene journalism, the term feature story—known in Slovene as *reportažna vrsta* or *reportaža*—is often used as an umbrella term, explains Merljak. It consists of three genres: *klasična reportaža* (classic reportage; a genre similar to literary journalism because of its complexity and aesthetic dimension), *reporterska zgodba* (reported stories; these are elementary stories without sophistication, complexity and aesthetic dimension of classic reportage), and *potopis* (travelogue). See also Merljak Zdovc (2008).

¹⁹ The book has not been translated into English yet.

²⁰ I conducted a telephone interview with the author on 18 July 2008.

reads and interprets Grohar's feelings and thoughts. The style of writing is altogether reminiscent of traditional realistic novels. Kajzer made it clear that he did not alter any facts, but stressed that the reader must nevertheless be aware of the subjective nature of truth. Imagination (mostly that of the people Kajzer interviewed) did alter some of the facts and thus made Grohar's life into a work of fiction or rather *faction*.²¹ The writer claims that he was not familiar with the works of new journalists; he explained that the idea for writing a biographical novel simply occurred to him, probably because he had always been interested in historical topics. Neither did he read Capote or Mailer at that time.²² It is interesting to see how Kajzer—completely independently from the works and influences of the American documentarists—created his own documentary novel and presented it as such.

Later Slovene novels often assume traditional forms be they of historical or (auto)biographical types. In terms of the literary form and style, many of these works read like traditional realistic novels; some even resort to rather archaic language that reminds the reader of the main representatives of nineteenth-century Slovene Realistic prose, authors like Janko Kersnik and Ivan Tavčar.

Lojze Kovačič's (1928–2004) complex work, *Prišleki* (The newcomers, 1984–85),²³ should be viewed on this background. Kovačič's historical saga is an extremely elaborate and detailed narrative. His largely autobiographical works incorporate many other approaches and styles, and thus are truly versatile and quite demanding reading.²⁴ Alenka Koron (2006) notes that Kovačič included in his semi-documentary tale many recollections of encounters with some of the important personages of Slovene cultural life, including young writers who became famous in subsequent decades. "These features clearly bring *The immigrants* closer to the genre of memoir" (Koron 2006: 157). However, Kovačič's narrative is still novelistic; the prose is stylized, the author uses a diversity of socially stratified discourses, imagery, a series of rhetorical figures, and an aestheticized temporal ordering. He clearly mixes autobiography, memoir, and fiction, hence his work is a generic hybrid. It is also possible to read Kovačič's novel as a contemporary *Bildungsroman* in which, as Koron

²¹ The term *faction* was first introduced into literary studies by Alex Haley, who used it to describe his novel *Roots* (1976); the word simply denotes a fusion of fact and fiction.

²² Kajzer's thoughts, as extracted from our telephone interview.

²³ Alenka Koron (2006) proposes also an alternate title, *The immigrants*.

²⁴ Kovačič's family moved around a lot (Vienna, Brussels, and Strasbourg) before they finally settled in Basel, where Lojze Kovačič was born to a German mother and a Slovene father.

observes, “individual development and spiritual maturation do not lead the protagonist to a reconciliation with society, but to a vitalist perseverance in the world as it is, or as it once was” (Koron 2006: 157–58).

A somewhat different take on an autobiographical tale is to be found in Miloš Mikeln’s book *Veliki voz* (The Big Dipper, 1992). This extensive, chronicle type of writing is a fusion of facts and fiction; it is a generically mixed account and in this respect reminiscent of Kajzer and Kovačič’s works. Mikeln’s epic novel portrays the history of two Slovene families from Celje, related by blood and bitterly divided by politics. One socialist and the other conservative, the two families represent the traditional Slovene split, which comes vividly to life against the backdrop of two devastating world wars. Mikeln’s historical novel is based on facts related to the Vidovič family, the writer’s ancestors.²⁵ Through personal stories, the author details for the reader a period of time starting with World War I and reaching beyond World War II. The appendix elaborately explains historical developments on Yugoslav territory between 1918 and 1945. The author explains that

the Vidovič family originates from a place on the very edges of the Brkini region. None of the two brothers, neither Franc, born in 1878, nor Štefan, born in 1893, ever made it clear where the family had come from and there were no documents either that could reveal their origin... [T]here are streams there that flow into a wider river, as is customary, and the river is called the River, a name of some vanity or of some pretence, if you will, but if you follow the stream of that river, you don’t reach the Kolpa River or the Sava River or the Black Sea, or some other river that flows into the Adriatic Sea, no, you don’t get anywhere; the river simply ends. It disappears. (1)²⁶

The reader witnesses the disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the subsequent creation of Yugoslavia; Hitler and Mussolini’s invasion of Yugoslavia is described, along with all the major battles in (mostly) Slovene lands (Mikeln gives a day-by-day account of the battles). Lastly, the reader receives an unbiased overview of the political state of affairs that eventually led to setting the borders of the Slovene state. The documentation is part of an extremely detailed traditional novel with historical patina comprised of phrases and sentence structures in use more

²⁵ The Vidovič family, as presented in the novel, is based on the author’s own family, the names and certain facts were altered, however.

²⁶ The book has not been translated into English. The translation of the passage is my own.

than half a century ago. They contribute excessively to the novel's authenticity.

A more recent example of Slovene documentary fiction is the journalist and globe-trotter Željko Kozinc's *Dotik sveta: Zgodba arhitekta Janeza Hacin* (A touch of the world: The story of the architect Janez Hacin, 2006), which exhibits many characteristics of a documentary novel.²⁷ The author first intended to write a journalistic piece, but Hacin's story turned out to be so interesting and multilayered that Kozinc found it impossible to squeeze it into an article, so the text grew into a novel. "Hacin's life proved rich and complex enough for a book-length biographical overview, perhaps even a true-life novel," explains the author in the introduction. Kozinc's creative process, his "building-up" of his narrative reminds one very much of Capote's, Mailer's, and also Kajzer's strategies. Moreover, his diligent collecting of documentary data, as well as his inclusion of various reports, letters, and photographs go hand in hand with the demands of literary journalism.²⁸

Dotik sveta is the elaborate biography of architect, businessman, and philanthropist Janez Hacin that at times reads like a detective novel. Hacin is a truly worldly person who, already as a young man, lived in many cities around the world, from Vienna to Stockholm; he later on went to graduate from Princeton. After many years of traveling around the globe, he found his base in Geneva.²⁹ America, however, played an important role in Hacin's life and certainly gave him the creative courage he sorely lacked while still living in Slovenia.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the historical novel with its various colorings, from the (auto)biographical to crime novels, was the prevailing genre in Slovenia. It seems to have had an ongoing appeal for both writers and readers. The contemporary Slovene (historical) novel is characterized by eclecticism, by incorporating various genres into one narrative unit, as well as by relativization of the truth or the notion of the real. Yet apparently, even in postmodern times, the Slovene novel maintains its

²⁷ The book has not been translated into English.

²⁸ Sonja Merljak Zdovc (2008) observes that Kozinc approached his work primarily as a journalist; she defines the book as an instance of literary journalism (which, in the case of longer narratives, she equates with the nonfiction or documentary novel)

²⁹ Hacin was very enthusiastic about America as a young man and he actually wrote a letter to Louis Adamič, expressing his keen interest in moving overseas. Adamič wrote him back and was quite critical of the U.S. at that time; he even wrote Hacin about his thinking of moving to Australia. This was already the time when Adamič was persecuted in the U.S. and accused of spying for the Soviet Union (Kozinc 2006: 28).

connections with the tradition of literary realism.³⁰ “Traditionalism of the Slovene novel in the last decade of the twentieth century,” writes Alojzija Zupan Sosič, “lies in its clear and unambiguous story line, plausible relations among literary characters, and easily identifiable and coherent spatio-temporal dimension” (2003: 47). The type of the novel that observes a traditional, linear narrative structure, resorts to realistic language, and yet simultaneously builds on a postmodern perception of truth and reality represents one side of the Slovene literary continuum.

On the other side of the Slovene (literary) postmodern prose spectrum lie works that could still, tentatively, be called documentary narratives. They also frequently display characteristics that place them closer to Virginia Woolf and James Joyce’s experiments with limited depth vision in narrative. The narrative structures of these works, with their occasional self-consciousness about the writing process and the stress on subjectivity, clearly echo not only postmodernistic poetics, but also a modernistic approach.

Such mixing of various characteristics, from traditional to modernistic and postmodernistic, is noticeable in *Izganjalec hudiča* (The exorcist, 1994),³¹ a novel by Tone Perčič, who belongs to a generation of writers who began publishing in the early 1970s. We can read this novel as a kind of alternative, unconventional history of totalitarian regimes, incorporating communism, Nazism, as well as fundamentalist governments that, especially in present times, engage in bloody battles against the West.³² Perčič’s writing is thematically and geographically versatile, for it incorporates features of travel narratives, as well as political and war novels. Particularly in its second part, the novel quickly changes its setting; the reader thus travels with the writer with incredible swiftness from Trieste to Dresden, Dusseldorf, and Vienna.

The author’s perspective on the historical past as well as on more topical events deviates somewhat from the “official truth” in histories or daily newspapers. History in the novel is shown to be a construct, a game, or a story, and the people who blindly believe in it to have been ruthlessly

³⁰ “Realism,” in the words of Malcolm Bradbury, “had never truly gone away.” ... “Virtually no work that sees itself as antithetical to realism does not contain it as a main constituent, and most major movements considered anti-realist have seen themselves as in the end a new form of realism” (1992: 264). What altered throughout history was human perception and experience of reality.

³¹ The book has not been translated into English.

³² Perčič indirectly talks about real people in his story—for example, Hitler and Eva Braun; there is an entire chapter in the book that discusses the possibility of poisoning Hitler (a member of his secret service is discussing this with one of the chief characters in the book).

manipulated. This perspective adds a postmodern touch to the novel, as does the blurring of the line between facts and fiction. The narrator himself expresses this: “There is no truth in this world. At least not for the time being. If you really want to know, the truth is created as we go, like a stone or tufa” (352).³³ In Perčič’s world, the truth is subject to manipulation; it has become, in accordance with the postmodern paradigm, a linguistic construct.

Izganjalec hudiča displays intertextuality that blends the “objective” truths of political manifestos, historical records, and memoirs into its own truth which is in fact the truth of the absence of any final, ultimate, logical reality. The novel’s conclusion is that “in the end, it’s all the same to me, even if a lie is the only reliable truth in this world. For, in principle, these too are only words, and nothing more!” (442) Perčič’s work displays characteristics of both a conspiracy (historical) novel and historiographic metafiction. Linda Hutcheon’s definition of historiographic metafiction well applies to Perčič’s novel. In *A poetics of postmodernism* (1988) and *The politics of postmodernism* (1989) she defines historiographic metafiction as a self-reflexive narrative that at the same time lays claims to (recent or more remote) historical events and personages. Its key aspect is the tension between metafiction and the historical or factual. Reality or history is manipulated and thus acquires a fictional cast.³⁴ The paragraph has to do with postmodernist features. The interjection of an observation on a modernist feature seems out of place.

With its eclecticism, the contemporary Slovene novel reflects postmodern pluralism. Rather than focusing on national identity, as it was customary in the past, it addresses personal identities of individuals and is marked by autoreflexive notions of one’s own sentiments (through irony, cynicism, and parody).³⁵ Furthermore, it incorporates various subgenres into one narrative unit, which contributes to the relativity of truth and reality.

³³ The translation is my own.

³⁴ Perčič attested to the influences of Beckett’s *Molloy* (1951) and Faulkner’s *Light in August* (1932). There are sections that remind the reader of Eco’s *Foucault’s pendulum* (1988). The book’s main theme is taken from the notorious work *The protocols of the Elders of Zion*, which is widely considered as the beginning of the conspiracy theory in literature. (The idea of Freemasonry was previously already used by Eco in *Foucault’s pendulum*.) At the end of the book Perčič adds a list of works that he used as his core references. He names such works as Dante Alighieri’s *The divine comedy*, Adolf Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*, and a critical appraisal of the infamous *Protocols of Zion*, to list a few.

³⁵ Alojzija Zupan Sosič states that the contemporary Slovene novel is guided by a new and up to the 1990s unseen and unwritten emotionality which she calls “new emotionality.” See Zupan Sosič (2006).

Pluralism and blending of fact and fiction also characterize the contemporary historical novel, one of the most enduring prose genres in Slovene literature. The genre acts as a preserver of Slovene national identity and cultural heritage. In some contemporary Slovene novels, fictionalization is quite distinct, and some works can be interpreted as instances of historiographic metafiction.³⁶ However, novels that rely heavily on extra-textual reality are still frequently found. In fact, they prevail over historiographic metafiction. Although stylistically they stay within the framework of traditional (historical) realism, these narratives are well aware of the unstable nature of facts—in other words, of the unreliability of “official” history.³⁷ Both types could be labeled as contemporary documentary novels or modern fictions.

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³⁶ On postmodernism and the Slovene contemporary novel, see Barbara Pregelj (2003).

³⁷ With the rise of literary Realism (and later Naturalism) in the nineteenth century, *belles lettres* came closer to experiential reality than ever before. Fiction produces, paradoxically, “the effect of the real” or “l’effet de reel,” to use Barthes’ wording (1968). In his *Critical essays* (1972) Barthes lucidly states that “we always conceive the imaginary as a symbol of the real; we want to see art as a litotes of nature” (Barthes 1972: 55). See also Marko Juvan (2006).

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POVZETEK**DOKUMENTARNE PRIPOVEDI V KONTEKSTU
POSTMODERNE: ZDRUŽENE DRŽAVE AMERIKE IN
SLOVENIJA**

Članek išče paralele med poetiko postmoderne (in postmodernizma), ki favorizira hibridne žanre in zavrača ultimativno "veliko pripoved" zgodovine ter ameriškim in slovenskim dokumentarnim romanom. Vzpon dokumentarnega ali nefikcijskega romana v 60. letih v ZDA se močno navezuje na pojav novega (literarnega) žurnalizma. Obe naraciji povezuje prepletanje referenc na empirično realnost in novelističnih pripovednih tehnik. Med ameriški "dokumentaristi" izstopa Truman Capote in njegovo delo *Hladnokrvno* (1965). Capote je trdil, da je njegova pripoved popolnoma natančna in objektivna odslikava umora v Kansasu, njegovo pisanje pa razkriva kar nekaj odstopov od »golih« dejstev. Norman Mailer in John Berendt se bolj približata temu, kar avtorica, po poskusu odkritja primerne (a še vedno delno odprte, kot so odprti tudi okviri postmoderne in postmodernizma) definicije, poimenuje dokumentarni roman. Prispevek sprašuje, ali je v Sloveniji mogoče najti dela, ki bi jih lahko označili za dokumentarne romane. Ključno vprašanje je tako vprašanje konceptov hibridnih dokumentarnih žanrov in postmoderne ter njune preslikave v slovenski literarni in širši kulturni prostor. Ameriški literarni trendi so slovensko literaturo začeli izraziteje zaznamovati šele od konca 70. let prejšnjega stoletja dalje. Poleg vpliva relativno heterogenih ameriških smernic pa lahko vzroke za precejšnji žanrski sinkretizem in razvoj številnih avtopoetik med sodobnimi slovenskimi avtorji iščemo tudi v specifični slovenske literature, oziroma slovenske "literarne postmoderne" (Kos), ki odraža geopolitično preteklost naroda. V naboru nekoliko starejših in tudi mlajših slovenskih piscev odkrijemo dela, ki (pogojno) lahko veljajo za dokumentarne romane (npr. Janez Kajzer, Miloš Mikeln, Tone Perčič in Željko Kozinc). Opazna pa so nihanja med izraziteje postmodernističnimi (historiografsko metafikcijskimi) pripovedmi na eni strani in bolj tradicionalno realističnimi (zgodovinskimi) na drugi.