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INTRODUCTION TO COUNTER(F)ACTUALS

The process of questioning the authority of academic history has been under way for at least four decades, initiated by Hayden White and other New Historians in the 1970s, but we are still grappling with its various reverberations, trying to meet the challenges of renegotiating our relationship with the past. The present collection of papers, although markedly diverse in terms of their theoretical approaches and chosen examples, is an attempt at confronting one of the consequences of undermining fundamental tenets of academic historiography: the 21st century rise of counterfactual narratives and other speculative forms of thinking about the past. Despite the thematic variety of the papers presented here, they are connected by the same conceptual framework, namely by current redefinitions of the ontological status of various culturally shaped relationships with the past. We have been particularly inspired by Alun Munslow’s works, in which he convincingly argues that the discourse of academic history can hardly be regarded as a mimetic re-presentation of the past. Faced with the impossibility of accessing or recreating that which assumedly happened, historians can only come up with various accounts of the past, “morphing” it by means of various narrative conventions and rhetorical devices. In this respect, historical narratives resemble artistic forms of historying, which until recently have been regarded as non-factual and, therefore, deprived of cognitive value and possible political impact. From this point of view, one task seems particularly significant: bridging the gap between the realm of academically sanctioned factual narratives and the sphere of speculative fiction.

In this broad theoretical context, we decided to look at the growing pool of counterfactual accounts of the past to identify their possible forms and functions. One assumption seemed obvious to us: if historiography has already undermined the dichotomy between fact and fiction, a similar redefinition is required in the field of counterfactual narratives, until recently regarded simply as a binary opposite to the master narrative of history. That is why we have come up with a working hypothesis that the former “what-if” narratives are today turning into counter(f)actual ones. The bracketed “f” stresses the double meaning of the term and the complexity of the relationship of these forms of historying with the established view of the past, for they do not run counter to the current state of knowledge but, rather, extend it to include in it the hypotheses or speculations that are still waiting for actualisation. At the same time, they significantly contribute to the production of knowledge about the past, providing an opportunity to renegotiate it, subvert its dominant view, or counteract the processes of social oblivion.

All the authors of the texts presented here discussed these and related issues at a workshop Counter[f]actual Strategies in History Writing, Literature, and Arts, organized by Małgorzata Sugiera and myself at Performativity Department of Jagiellonian University in Krakow on 16th–17th November 2017. The event took place within the framework of the project Performances of Memory: Testimonial, Reconstructive and Counterfactual Strategies in Literature and Performative Arts of the 20th and 21st Centuries, conducted at the Polish National Science Centre (NCN) (UMO-2014/15/G/HS2/04803).
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The questioning the authority of academic history has been under way for at least four decades. The relationship with the past is trying to meet various challenges of renegotiations. The articles in the journal *Art History & Criticism* No. 14 contribute to the production of wider and deeper knowledge about the past, providing opportunity to renegotiate it, subvert its dominant view, or counteract the processes of social oblivion.