

The Formability of History: Uchronia in Contemporary Hungarian Short Fiction



Áron Domokos

The idea of “uchronia” is addressed by a number of terms in various lines of intellectual endeavor, such as alternative history, parahistory, allohistory, virtual history, counterfactual history, historiographic metafiction, magical historicism, and “poetic historiography” (Czeglédi). All of these designations denote popular and educational historical narratives based on a “what if” thought experiment reflecting on contemporary social and political issues (Suvin). “Uchronography” (Trencsényi 38), in turn, is the activity that the interpreters of uchronia are engaged in. The reason why I decided to use the term “uchronia” (‘non-time,’ ‘never-time’) is that it has the connotation of “u-topia” in the sense of ‘non-place.’ It has numerous branches and connections to other genres: travel-adventure stories, lost island stories, dystopias, utopias, and satirical visions. What is more, its closest relative is the historical novel.

As a matter of fact, uchronia inherits the fundamental dilemmas of the philosophy of history and historical scholarship and calls attention to the fact that history is created by linguistic means. The main philosophical issues addressed by uchronia are related to time, determinism, and causality (Hellekson). As Angenot puts it: “Uchronia is less the refusal of real history, than the recognition of its ineluctable laws; by altering the course of events the author gives birth to a new history, but one that still contains the same rational determinism and contingency as empirical history” (qtd. in Csicsery-Ronay 105).

The aims of the present study are:

1. to distinguish uchronia conceived of as literary fiction from uchronias combined with SF; and
2. to investigate the 281 short prose pieces of Hungarian-language published between 2014 and 2018 submitted in application for the Péter Zsoldos Award.

The analysis of the short speculative narratives identified as uchronia proper or uchronic narratives will lend itself to useful generalizations on contemporary Hungarian science fiction.

Literary Uchronia: Entering SF

In my interpretation, literary (narrative fictional) uchronias are historical novels rather than pieces of SF. They form a special group within the latter, and with a thematic connection they can become SF (uchronic SF). Classification is a much debated issue. In Csicsery-Ronay’s opinion, uchronia is hard to squeeze into “future stories” within SF (102). Rodiek almost disparagingly

pushes SF-like works away claiming that their worlds are very different from reality. In my view, the components and characteristics of uchronias are as follows:

1. They describe an alternative historical world vis-à-vis history as we know it, built along an alternative timeline reaching at least the author's present (at least at the level of indication) and they potentially show a distant future. The points of connection and correspondence between the present of the author and his or her contemporary readers on the one hand, and those of the hypothetical timeline on the other are key: it is these characteristics that determine whether we are dealing with an alternative history or an alternative universe. Following Jemisin, world construction can be said to be of the following types:
 - superficial: enigmatic, fragmented (my addition);
 - moderately detailed;
 - as detailed as possible (outlining the multitude of subsystems of the society).
2. There is an indication of the *divergence point* (or *neuralgic point*: Nagy 26). That is where the known historical timeline separates into an alternative timeline. In some pieces it is not possible to clearly point to or designate this moment. These can be referred to as "blurred divergence points."
3. Uchronia in the uchronia: Another timeline (usually that of history as we know it or something that resembles it) is presented in narration in a *mise en abyme*-like manner (Bene 202). This feature was already present in works that formed the genre (Geoffrey-Château). It is usually introduced by a text with a different narration and focalization within the larger text: a letter, a diary, a fictional text, an epigraph, a lexicon entry etc. Alternatively, it can be a suggestion of a character. In general, it suffices to include an indication of it (This narrative element is similar to the reference to a season in the classic haiku.).

If criterion No. 1 is met but criteria No. 2 and 3 are not, the work under scrutiny still counts as a uchronia. If the time factor is different in 1 (e.g. the time span is a couple of hours, days, or weeks), I suggest that we call the piece a "uchronic" text rather than a uchronia proper. The "components" of uchronia including SF elements (1 + 2 + 3) are as follows:

4. Some SF motifs are included or integrated. There is a "(pseudo)scientific" or supernatural explanation for the fantastic diversion of the divergence point and the alternative world with an alternative timeline. This may be:
 - time travel;
 - the theory of parallel worlds (*multiverse*);
 - virtual reality;
 - an altered state of consciousness (strictly speaking, this is not necessarily SF);

- a miracle, magic or a supernatural event (qualities characteristic of speculative fiction rather than SF pieces);
 - an absurd, surreal diversion (likewise qualities characteristic of speculative fiction rather than SF pieces).
5. A technological defamiliarization is present: technology anomalous for its own period is featured in the timeline (We may consider this to be an interference in Kondratyev cycles: the whole steampunk family is an example for this category.).

Alternative Hungary

As a kind of starting point for the discussion of the narratives to be presented, I would like to draw attention to a lesser-known Hungarian uchronic short story. I consider Ferenc Herczeg's (1863-1954) *Szíríusz* [Sirius] published in 1890 to be a forerunner of Hungarian uchronic literature. Although Herczeg's narrative playing with the idea of time travel is not classified as SF by the critical reception because in the end all the actions are disguised as a dream (Sárdi 13), the ideas related to time travel, which have since become widespread, are remarkable. According to the storyline, the protagonist of noble origin, Ákos Tibor, undertakes to test a rocket invented by a "crazy" scientist that would take him back to the eighteenth century. During the preparations, the two men are given to uchronic thoughts: "Beware," says the scientist, "not to change the events of the last century. I don't know what would happen if you nevertheless did, but I suspect that a world twisted from its logic would crumble you" (Herczeg 21, translation mine). A little later, the text gains even more momentum: as the hero is substantially dissatisfied with the eighteenth century, he muses in the presence of another character: "Your century is worthless as it is . . . It has to be thoroughly reconstructed . . . I need my Brockhaus lexicon that includes everything in the world. We will take the railway, the steamer, the telegraph, the parliament and the whole progress from there. We will give the army a back loader and a steel cannon so that we can take back Silesia and conquer the whole world" (Herczeg 40, translation mine). Thus we can find the feeling of delay, the belief in progress, the imperial dream, conservatism, and a proto-steampunk idea in one single package from 1890.

On Contemporary Hungarian Uchronic SF Short Fiction

Having applied the above criteria to 281 narratives published between 2014 and 2018 that were submitted in application for the Péter Zsoldos Award, I could identify seven texts as uchronic SF.

The Heating Cold War

There is a multitude of imaginative topics to which a great number of contemporary alternative stories are devoted, yet, as Schneider-Mayerson (68) observes, the Cold War is not one of these. Neither is Hungary's recent past; for example, the 1989 change of the political regime. Among the short stories submitted in application for the Péter Zsoldos Award, "Pacem" (Judith Áfonya Nagy, b. 1985) is one of the few exceptions, which seems to have combined the movies

Gravity (2013), *Gagarin: The First in Space* (2013), and *The Martian* (2015), as well as the Cold War dread of James Bond films in a frightening alternate historical, fictional drama written in a diary-like manner. The text views history as the clash between empires and lacks Hungarian references. The Russian and American astronauts' journey begins at the end of 1972, after the Voskhod program and the Soyuz program, at the height of the competition between the two great powers. The diary entries of the Russian female pilot show the gradual effects that the escalating conflict on Earth has in space. One such triggering event is the Russian invasion of Cuba in 1973, yet there is no exact divergence point here. We also witness turning points of the American pilot's life, and his descent into paranoia. Having lost her American companion in an accident, the Russian heroine eventually reaches Mars, where she reflects on her errors with little hope for survival.

How Wonderful it is to be Hungarian

Novella [A short story] (György Dragon, 1966-2015) is a sarcastic piece applying the narrative technique used in Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle*. In an alternate historical world, a fictional work emerges that presents the author's reality. In the alternative timeline of 2007 (cf. *mise en abyme* earlier), Hungary is a well-organized, wealthy imperialist global power having won every battle of every war. In the fictional world war, the Hungarian-Inca-Aztec axis defeats the German-Scottish-Frankish coalition. There is no United States, yet there is a country called the Kommancs (pron. "Commountsh") Republic. South America, Gibraltar, as well as the cities of Munich and London, have all been colonized by the Hungarians. Space research is thriving, and the education system is excellent, paying sufficient attention to the body, health, and exercise while not neglecting the development of cognitive abilities, either. The division of labor is ideal: only one person per family is allowed to work. The mental state of the country is expressed in the proud daily mantra: "How wonderful it is to be Hungarian." The divergence point of the parallel world is the historical peasant uprising of 1514, which is a successful revolution in the fictitious realm, turning its leader György Dózsa into György (George) I, the greatest Hungarian king.

Unwrinkled

With the help of Nikola Tesla's genius, *Örökség* [The Inheritance] (István Márki, b. 1965) modifies an event in the early twentieth century, as a result of which only one "great war" emerges, and the Second World War is missing. Likewise, there is no Holocaust, no Soviet occupation of Hungary in 1945, no Hungarian revolution in 1956, and no political regime change in 1989. History for Hungary is thus "unwrinkled": a trauma-free, smooth, and triumphant path. One of the characters in the short story reports how he got from the 1900s to 1955, and how his time travel "distorted" the 1900s and even earlier years. The Spanish-American War of 1898 functions as a point of divergence; the defeat of the Americans ensures that the United States never becomes a political factor. The Great War (WWI) did take place, but with a completely different outcome. The Austro-Hungarian Monarchy flourished rather than collapsed, slowly stepping out of the shadow of the German Empire. German became a world language, while the United States and France were turned into German protectorates, with German being a second official language

in both. Berlin emerged as the center of the world, the United Kingdom broke down into its constituent parts, the Russian revolution was suppressed, and the Hungarians were given the opportunity to live in an independent Kingdom of Hungary. The manifestation of the alternate history, that is, all the alterations brought about in the past, appears as “History” for everybody in the story due to the historicity of the present. Therefore, all of these changes are self-evident to the protagonist living in the present of the short story. It is no wonder that he ponders: How could the United States be a major power in the global political scene?

Killing Hitler

István Nemere (b. 1944) is a Hungarian cult author having published over 700 titles under about four dozen pen names as well as his own. He has tried his hand at almost every popular genre, and has written about a multitude of topical national and international issues. Hungarian topics that his historical novels, textbooks on history, and works of educational historical nonfiction are devoted to include bloodlines and important battles in the Carpathian Basin, the Hungarian Soviet Republic of 1919, the 1920 Treaty of Trianon, and the 1989 change of the political regime. Interestingly enough, despite his vested interest in both SF and Hungarian history, Nemere has only produced one uchronic short story thus far. His spy narrative, “Időváltó” [The Time Changer], comprises love, technology (a subdermal tracking implant), and the character of the villain, and adds the dilemmas of time travel and the most important challenge it entails, i.e., that the course of historical events must not be changed. Instead, a multiverse is created, that is, a number of separate alternative universes including ones with Julius Caesar, Genghis Khan, King Louis XIV, etc. never having seen the light of day. Writing about Hitler’s assassination in Vienna in 1911 is a trite idea, yet due to Nemere’s usage of the multiverse trick the piece is rather appealing.

No Alternative

Dinosaurs, simulacrum, virtual reality, gnosticism, marketing, book publishing, and the matrix are the keywords of *Raptor Isten* [Raptor God] (István Sas, 1946-2018). A layered narrative exciting both in its choice of theme and way of presentation, it nevertheless tends toward overcomplication. In this short story, a reptilian species is the dominant intelligent life form on the planet. The idea of an alternative evolution is not at all new in SF literature, yet the addition of a SF writer reptile and another reptile character designing computer games is definitely an inventive solution. They are the creators of a virtual reality telling us about the development of the human race and the everyday life of humans. The protagonists’ important existential questions (who they are, what reality is, who the creator / computer programmer is, etc.) are satirically countered by the fact that no matter what the world we live in is like, a market economy dominates with its faithful helper, the God of Marketing. Sas’s text, whether intentionally or unintentionally, is a textbook example of capitalist realism, according to which even the imagination is incapable of creating an alternative that transcends the capitalist way of production (Fisher 15-30).

Muslim-Hungarian Coexistence

The alternative story *Kisvárda sejkje* [The Sheikh of Kisvárda] (Csaba Gábor Trenka b. 1959) takes place in a parallel world and unfolds before us in the self-narration and recollection of a wandering homeless sage-sheikh able to recount several hundred tales. In addition to the main storyline moving confidently towards its goal, an exciting, complex world emerges through a number of micro-events. According to the Islamic calendar, the narrated events of the Islam-dominated parallel history take place in 1421, which corresponds to 2000 in the standard Gregorian calendar. The setting for the story is Kisvárda, a small town in the rather poor north-eastern part of Hungary populated with Muslim Hungarian inhabitants. Exactly when, why, and how these circumstances came to pass is left unexplained. The environment is Islamized, as exhibited through the names of the public spaces: Chaldeans' Street, Abu Abbas Shrine, Ramesses II Square etc., resulting in a Hungaro-Islamic hybrid construction. The same happens to personal names: Miriam Horváth, Hassan Marosi-Kun, Omar Lakatos, Abdullah Kiss-Kovács. The coexistence of Hungarians, Muslims, and Roma (the poorest social stratum in the story) is peaceful and inter-religion friendships are common. Christianity is on the brink of extinction, yet there are still some devout believers; at the same time, religion does not occupy a central position and there are no value judgments against any belief system. We are dealing with bradychronia here: the level of technological advancement is relatively low, the streets are lit with kerosene lamps, camels are among the commodities sold in the market, there is no internet, and there are not even computers, but collections and magazines of SF stories abound. Despite the obvious differences, the environment has the feel of the laid-back bourgeois milieu of the late nineteenth-century dual monarchy of Austria-Hungary with some Middle Eastern flavors. We can root for the teenage heroes, especially the young, fiction-loving narrator. Some of the pulp adventures that he reads are inserted into the short story, including a piece about how his first love and his failed attempt at courtship got him into fatal trouble. While definitely a uchronia proper, this extraordinary piece also exhibits characteristics of other genres. I agree with Baka's (2014) acknowledgment of the short story's aesthetic merits, as the linguistic-stylistic elaboration as well as the rich and inventive network of narration raise it to a level that stands with the highest literature.

Alternative Cosmology

In the outstandingly amusing *Prospektus* [The Brochure] (György Horváth, b. 1977), the bifurcation of the past is sometime in the 1850s. Although there is no exact divergence point, this is when the alien race of Tefrits arrive on the planet Earth. Their technological advancement enriches the Habsburg Monarchy in exchange for the construction of the Wall around the Great Hungarian Plain. The originally small ring gradually grows and expands in the course of the story, reaching a height of 2857 meters and an area of 300 square kilometers by the beginning of the twentieth century. Thanks to the knowledge of the Tefrits, Hungary becomes a powerful political actor occupying an area from what is now Miercurea Ciuc (Csíkszereda) to Rijeka (Fiume) and from Graz to Krakow. The brochure mentioned in the title is an informational document on

the Wall describing its curious nature, development, and staff regulations. The newly divorced protagonist fails to read some of the sections (e.g., the one saying that vertiginous people must not be employed) and this becomes a source of many complications and much humor. Working conditions on the wall are similar to those in a multicultural organization. Employees speak a mixed language and culinary products from all over the world are available to them. However, occupational safety and health is not a priority and instead of workers' accident insurance we find a system of employers' compensation insurance. Not much is revealed about the state of Hungary except that it is presumably a central rather than a peripheral country. NATO definitely exists but no mention is made of the (post)socialist region. There are only enigmatic or fragmented references to what the rest of the countries are like (cf. superficial world construction mentioned earlier). The universe described also becomes "alternative" in the sense that the known natural laws do not seem to apply. The climax of the story is when it turns out that the ominous Wall is the birth channel of the Earth, a viviparous planet. This absurd idea is presented in various ways: techniques of realism are put to work alongside the tools of humor and lyricism. The short story is a playful blend of the hardships of employment, the fear of death, the trauma of the Treaty of Trianon, and the Gaia hypothesis. A remarkable manifestation of what I call a *conservative imperial dream* (see section V below), this is "a grotesque, thought-provoking story written with a great sense of rhythm" (Böszörményi, translation mine). It is definitely another work of considerable literary value.

General Remarks and Attempts at a Conclusion

Only a few studies published in the last decade have been devoted to the subject of Hungarian-language SF-themed uchronias. Hungarian uchronic novels have received considerable attention (Baka 2014, 2017, 2020, and 2021), as opposed to discussions of short fiction. Keserű and H. Nagy, in their collection of papers, provide an overview of the international theoretical literature, while the works of Hegedűs, Gerencsér, and Pintér form an integral part of the Hungarian-language critical reception of the matter at hand. Some of the above researchers point out that, in their view, strikingly few Hungarian texts have played with historical time and possibilities so far. Pintér (in 2013) mentions seven such novels, Gerencsér (in 2016) refers to eighteen texts altogether, adding short stories and pieces of nonfiction to the novels. As for me, I have managed to identify twenty-four novels, one comic book, and as many as twenty-seven short stories as Hungarian-language uchronic SF stories. That is to say, of the whole pool of Hungarian-language SF pieces, I only consider fifty-two texts to be uchronic SF pieces, and only seven pieces out of the four years and nearly 300 texts examined fall into this category.

Whether we review the history of the genre from as early as the middle of the nineteenth century or only from the end of World War II, it does not amount to a lot. In my opinion, the small number of such texts is attributable to the following three reasons:

1. Understanding uchronic narratives often requires above-average historical knowledge and/or an extraordinary intellectual-cognitive effort;
2. “Existing” state socialisms (just like the late capitalism of our time), by their very nature, self-identify/ied as the endpoint of a historical development, and thus reject(ed) all alternatives. Or, if not altogether, they (could) only present them as negative possibilities;
3. As the number of works written in the genres of “traditional” historical fiction and historical nonfiction taken together is still relatively low, their corpus might not have been able to construct a common national memory or consensus against which alternative points of view can reasonably be formed.

Referring to Wag Moore, Gallagher states that most authors of uchronia “departed from common reality in order to test new political ideas and experiment with alternative social possibilities” (149). The concept of history detectable in the texts I have investigated, on the other hand, can be said to be rather conservative: it does not include a vision of various forms of alternative social organization; neither does it posit that “history” can manifest itself differently to different groups. Rosenfeld sees alternative historiography primarily as presentist, i.e., one that lives in the present. “It explores the past less for its own sake than to utilize it instrumentally to comment upon the present. Based as it is upon conjecture, alternate history necessarily reflects its authors’ hopes and fears” (150). I suggest that we look at the texts at hand in this way, which enables us to identify a considerable number of them as instances of what I call the “imperial dream.” In his paper on utopia, Veres applies a similar label: “Great Hungarian Dream.” The main features of these textual worlds can be summarized as follows: they change Hungary’s geopolitical position from the semi-periphery to the center (being both an affirmative and a revisionist move); they realize imperialist aspirations far beyond the ideas of national sovereignty; they envision a problem-free Hungary with material and spiritual well-being; and they advocate for the ideology and practice of capitalism. We can also witness the practice of naive, joyful colonization in these narratives, in which colonial estates appear as if they were civil props such as a deer trophy or a ski pass. Last but not least, daydreaming is a uchronic act of compensation. That is to say, it always aims to relieve the readers of historical trauma by the elimination of great global and national cataclysms.

The texts that formed the basis of this study lack an “if the Nazis had won” narrative, although the Hungarian corpus is not devoid of the theme (Gáspár, Ajtay, Trenka, Galántai, Szélesi, Gráczer, Horváth). None of the short stories examined are steam-punk texts, not a single piece applies the idea of accelerated technological development (tychycronia), and only one story (“Dragon”) places the divergence point well before the modern era. The stories’ determinism is event-centric, military-historical, or technological. Interestingly enough, there are hardly any women or Gen Z authors, as it seems that Hungarian-language uchronia is a genre of middle-aged men socialized under socialism. The two outstanding collections of Hungarian-language uchronia (Cserna 2016 and 2020) devoted to the events of years 1919 and 1956, respectively, do not change the big

picture. Only the collection entitled *48 másképp* [1848 from a Different Point of View] (David) shows considerable age and gender diversity.

Apparently, searching for and finding short pieces of uchronia and uchronic short fiction in Hungarian is a challenging endeavor, as is the attempt to make the subject of Hungarian-language uchronias more diverse and the genre more popular in this country. The task may be carried out with the alliance of teachers of history and Hungarian literature. Students' imagination and belief in the formability of history can be further strengthened by offering them a class session involving creative writing assignments (Deszcz-Tryhubczak-Marecki) or the inclusion of alternate historical computer games (e.g., the strategy game *Civilization*).

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Author's Note

The webpage <http://www.zerowasteenglish.com/sf+counterfactual-histories> is a source of further pieces of relevant information for the interested reader.

Áron Domokos, Ph.D., is Senior Lecturer at MATE, Kaposvár. A graduate of ELTE, Budapest (M.A.s in Hungarian & library science, Ph.D. in library science), he was editor of the cultural magazines *Könyvjelző* [Bookmark] (2005-2010) and *Hungaricum* [Hungarian values worthy of distinction] (2009-2010). A member of the selection panel of the Péter Zsoldos Award (2014-2018), Domokos's scholarly output includes four published Hungarian-language papers related to recent Hungarian SF short fiction. His investigations are informed by the history of ideas, social philosophy and criticism, the history of books, as well as studies on literary readership and the production/consumption of popular literature.