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Documentary Writing and the Politics of Truth: From Soviet “Literature of Fact” to Contemporary Documentary Poetry

Abstract

In the 1920s, proponents of Soviet *literature of fact* proclaimed that fiction based on invented plots was destined to disappear along with the “bourgeois order.” The future, they argued, belonged to journalistic reportage, which would no longer be the exclusive domain of professional writers but could be practiced by anyone willing to learn the necessary techniques.

The 2000s and 2010s, in many countries—including Russia—witnessed a striking resurgence of documentary poetry, whose development in Russophone literature(s) continues today in new forms such as poetic autofiction and poetry based on interviews.

To what extent are these different modes of writing historically and conceptually connected?

In this lecture, I argue that Soviet *literature of fact* and contemporary documentary poetry are fundamentally distinct phenomena, grounded in divergent conceptions of truth. Reflecting on these differences may help us better understand the mechanisms through which post-truth politics operates in the contemporary world.

Ilya Kukulin is a literary critic, cultural historian, and sociologist of culture. Currently, he is a visiting faculty member at the University of Massachusetts Amherst and the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. He authored a book *Machines of the Noisy Times: How the Soviet Montage Became an Aesthetic Method of the Unofficial Culture* (2015) and co-authored a monograph *A Guerilla Logos: The Project of Dmitry Aleksandrovich Prigov* (2022, with Mark Lipovetsky). His research interests include the sociology of contemporary culture, contemporary Ukrainian, Belarusian, and Russian poetry, Jewish cultural history, the history of Soviet literatures, and the history of unofficial poetry in the USSR.