

# Popular Authors in Search of Recognition: On the Polish Field of Science Fiction in the 1980s and 1990s

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## Abstract

Science fiction is often thought to be escapist. Indeed, many of its works can be described this way. However, numerous authors and readers in the 20<sup>th</sup> century combined a taste in popular entertainment with aspirations typically associated with more prestigious cultural domains. In other words, they looked for recognition outside the science fiction field. In the paper I examine the Polish case of this phenomenon in the 1980s and 1990s. I discuss biographical data on science fiction writers, demonstrating that they frequently had higher education degrees and worked as qualified specialists, and can thus be treated as members of the intelligentsia. Next, I examine relevant trends in science fiction itself, showing that many writers were preoccupied with socially respectable subjects in their novels and short stories. I also analyse the discourse on science fiction in the influential magazine *Fantastyka*, drawing from a larger content analysis of 361 editorials, 82 columns and 450 reviews. In the conclusions, I suggest that the authors attempted to alleviate the tension between the taste of the intelligentsia and the realities of popular culture. The authors' search for recognition was grounded in the interplay between their habitus and the conditions of the Polish science fiction field.

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## Introduction

Science fiction – a genre known for such titles as *Star Trek* and *Dune* – is often associated with escapist entertainment. This is partly due to its social origins. Between the 1920s and the 1940s, it was consolidated in the United States in pulp magazines: cheap periodicals ignored or shunned by high-status citizens (Rieder 2017).

However, many 20<sup>th</sup>-century authors and readers of the genre were scientifically educated and had high social aspirations. Although there seem to be no systematic data on the subject, post-war surveys carried out among magazine readers and fan convention attendees in the United States, the United Kingdom and Canada report high levels of college and university education, as well as average earnings exceeding mean population values (Berger 1977). Furthermore, the discourse on science fiction within its Anglo-Saxon fields used to juxtapose ‘ghetto’ and ‘mainstream’ fiction: the works written and recognised within the science fiction tradition and the works considered prestigious by academics, school teachers, journalists, politicians, etc. This juxtaposition usually implied that ‘the ghetto’ was much more valuable than ‘the mainstream’ would admit (Nicholls 2021). While these data are not representative of all science fiction readers (or writers, critics, translators, editors, publishers, etc.), they point to a significant subgroup who wished for its favorite genre to be seen widely as a legitimate, if not the most legitimate, branch of culture.<sup>1</sup>

The contemporary history of science fiction is thus, in part, a history of a search for recognition, including its highest form: prestige. In the view of numerous readers and authors, not only was science fiction not given its due value by society but its very existence often went unrecognised. In particular, it was hardly recognised by the proponents of legitimate culture: academics, school teachers, politicians, journalists and other people whose collective actions led to the consecration of certain works through prestigious literary awards, inclusion in the high school canon or favourable reviews in nationwide press titles.

In the following chapter I examine this phenomenon in the case of Poland in the 1980s and 1990s. I employ the theory of the literary field, which shows that literature in modernity came to be surrounded by its own social microcosm (Bourdieu 1996). Empirically, I draw from available biographical information on writers, from existing academic studies of Polish

science fiction and from an analysis of the discourse of a long-running magazine. I demonstrate that a significant number of participants in the Polish field of science fiction were preoccupied with socially respectable functions of literature, and unwilling to accept entertainment as the main focus of their preferred genres. In all this, I limit my interests to prose fiction, excluding other forms, such as movies or television series.<sup>2</sup>

Apart from its relevance to science fiction studies, I hope that the chapter will be useful to researchers working in other fields. First, it may show that the concept of recognition is useful in the study of at least some segments of the history of popular culture. Second, the chapter may contribute to the discussions on the intelligentsia, providing an example of how this group has made use of non-legitimate culture. Third, the analogies between the Polish case and the North American one (in the latter, the intelligentsia was not involved, so other class or occupational characteristics would need to be applied) lead to a general question: does the search for recognition tend to happen when large groups of educated people are passionately interested in popular culture? And fourth, the chapter may be a contribution to the sociology of literature, particularly due to the empirical focus on the literary magazine – a form that has been studied much less than the book.

## Between Science Fiction and Speculative Fiction

Before we move to the empirical part, some terminological notes are in order. First of all, I see genre as a set of similar works categorised together by a particular social group (or groups). Cultural genres, including science fiction, are defined as much by the internal order of the works themselves as by the acts of classification. Even if the works remain constant – which is not always the case – their discursive context changes depending on the time, place and social milieu. Genre boundaries are thus never fixed and cannot be captured by a reference to works alone. And yet ‘[p]rominent forms of cultural sociology ... have a tendency to work with quite rigid and fixed notions of genre and, therefore, tend to gloss over the creative and mobile drawing, re-drawing and imbrication of genre boundaries’ (Beer 2013: 146).

The dominant approach to genre definitions – in common thinking, the humanities and the social sciences – has been to look for the distinctive features of a set of works, and to

summarise these features in a concise, abstract form. This approach has its merits but we should also be aware of its limitations. A short definition does not give an insight into how a genre has been understood in its different social contexts, and can sometimes create an illusion of uniform understanding across all these contexts. To avoid this, I have decided to forego any strict genre definitions. Instead, I propose provisional outlines, asking the reader to treat them as such. The necessary brevity of this section should not make us forget that genre definitions in the Polish science fiction field were themselves part of a struggle for positions in this field, and that '[t]he social sciences deal with pre-named, pre-classified realities which bear proper nouns and common nouns, titles, signs, and acronyms ... the social sciences must take as their object of study the social operations of *naming* and the rites of institution through which they are accomplished' (Bourdieu 1991: 105, original italics). The remainder of the chapter should offer some insight into these processes.

In the English language, science fiction is often treated as one of the parts of a larger whole called 'speculative fiction' (Nicholls, Langford 2017). The rough Polish counterpart of that latter phrase is the word *fantastyka*. An influential dictionary of literary terms published in the late period of the Polish People's Republic defines 'fantastic' elements of fiction as those which 'do not correspond to the criteria of reality assumed in a given culture' (Głowiński 1988: 137). One of the problems with such definitions is that they imply that speculative fiction can be found in any society in history that has developed some idea of fiction. This downplays the fact that the dominant usage of the terms 'speculative fiction' and *fantastyka*, which is related to *A Game of Thrones* much more strongly than to the *Iliad*, concentrates on a particular set of genres rooted in the Enlightenment (at that time, a sharp contrast was introduced between mimetic and non-mimetic works, and the latter started to form a separate cultural domain, as in the case of Gothic fiction). Still, the view that speculative fiction revolves around impossible things – including the ones that may become possible in the future – reflects the likely intuition of most readers and authors, and it gives us an approximate image of the borders of the respective genres.

The term 'science fiction' itself has sometimes been used in Poland in its English form and sometimes in Polish as *fantastyka naukowa*. In my analysis of editorials, columns and reviews from the magazine *Fantastyka* (described later in the chapter), I have calculated what figures were named the most often as precursors of all speculative fiction. These figures turn out to be Herbert George Wells, Jerzy Żuławski, Jules Verne, Edgar Allan Poe and Aldous Huxley.

Moreover, two prosaists, Stanisław Lem and Janusz A. Zajdel, were frequently mentioned and praised as contemporary Polish science fiction writers. Among the works of all these authors, the ones usually associated with the science fiction tradition have been read for their entertainment value (see Verne's adventure novels) as well as for their futuristic reflection on technology and society (see Huxley's *Brave New World*). One of the ways to think about science fiction is to consider the interplay of both components.

In the 1980s, science fiction was the only genre of speculative fiction recognised widely in Poland. In the 1990s, the genre of fantasy became similarly salient (at that time, it was mostly identified in Poland with narrative depictions of medievalistic worlds in which magic is real, and it was gaining popularity not least due to Andrzej Sapkowski's stories about the witcher Geralt – published since 1986). But fantasy had not been present in Poland for long and it did not have the same air of respectability as science fiction. It would be difficult to find in early Polish fantasy a clear expression of the writers' yearning for legitimacy. For these reasons, I focus on science fiction and use the term 'science fiction field'. However, I apply the phrase 'speculative fiction' throughout the text when an umbrella term is needed. The intent of these terminological decisions is to put an emphasis on science fiction, but without forgetting about its relationships with other speculative fiction genres.

Now we can turn to three sources of information on the search for recognition in the science fiction field in Poland. The first source is biographical information on writers active near the end of the Polish People's Republic – information which allows classifying them as members of the intelligentsia. The second source is the available academic literature on Polish science fiction in the 1980s and 1990s. The third source is the editorials, columns and reviews published in the same magazine as the biographical information mentioned above.

## Polish Science Fiction Writers As the Intelligentsia: 1982–1990

Let us look at the biographical indicators of the social status of Polish science fiction writers. A useful source of such information in the 1980s is the bios that accompanied the short stories in the *Fantastyka* monthly, the only professional magazine devoted to science fiction in the Polish People's Republic (the post-war Polish state subjugated to the USSR until 1989). I have used this source to collect data on all 95 authors who published their stories in the

magazine from its founding in October 1982 to June 1990, right before *Fantastyka* changed its name to *Nowa Fantastyka*.<sup>3</sup> That change coincided with major transformations in the book publishing system in Poland, initiated in the late 1980s and culminating in 1990 in such events as the abolition of censorship and paper rationing (Klukowski, Tobera 2013: 68–73).<sup>4</sup> The information gathered is summarised in table 12.1.

Characteristic	Quantitative description	Cases of missing data (in the total of 95 cases)
Gender	87 men, 8 women	0
Level of education	By July 1990, 48 authors got an academic degree, while 7 did not	40
Type of education (either finished or unfinished)	17 authors: technical or hard sciences 19 authors: arts and humanities 18 authors: other (e.g. social sciences)	44

Table 12.1. Authors of stories printed in *Fantastyka* (1982–1990)

In addition, I have looked into the writers' occupations using the classification devised by Michał Pohoski and Kazimierz M. Słomczyński (1978). The authors distinguish ten large socioprofessional groups, from managers and higher cadres, through other types of white-collar workers, to blue-collar workers, farmers and others. The bios from *Fantastyka* indicate the occupation of 42 out of 95 writers, and 38 writers within this subset worked, at least for a time, as specialists. More specifically, they were mostly creative professionals, academic workers, teachers, engineers, etc.

According to Joanna Bar, if we want to decide whether someone belonged to the intelligentsia in post-war Poland, we should see if they completed secondary education before the Second World War or higher education after the war, and if they were they white-collar workers. Meeting at least one of these criteria is enough to qualify a person as a member of the

intelligentsia (Bar 2009: 24), and as we have seen, both conditions were met in the case of the vast majority of established writers whose stories appeared in *Fantastyka* in the 1980s. Many of them continued to be active in the next decade, and together with younger authors inculcated into a similar taste during their youth in the Polish People's Republic, they set the tone for much of Polish science fiction in the 1990s.<sup>5</sup>

This leads us to the issue of the writers' habitus, including the specifics of their taste in fiction. Basing on the work of several other academics, Adam Bartoszek has constructed the ideal type of the habitus of the contemporary intelligentsia. He lists the following constituent parts of that habitus: (1) recognising the value of self-education, (2) aspiring for cultural and social advancement and for creative work, (3) putting dignity above pragmatism and non-material values above material ones, (4) orienting oneself largely toward cultural aspirations, (5) putting 'high culture' above 'mass culture', (6) focusing one's social activity on the contact with works and ideas recognised by intellectual and moral authorities, (7) yearning to be an authority for others, particularly the youth, (8) being sensitive to poverty and other types of social harm, (9) caring for the independence and growth of one's homeland (Bartoszek 2005: 79). The following relationships can be suggested between most items in this list and the authors' positions and practices in the Polish science fiction field:

- We can link (1) and (2) to the authors' socioeconomic status.
- We can link (4), (6) and (7) to the authors' career choices, which placed them in a position to socialise with other culturally oriented people and to be read by the young.
- We can link (3) and (5) to the authors' preoccupation with social problems and to their complicated attitude toward entertainment in science fiction (to be described in more detail in the next sections).

This characterisation clearly points to the authors' aspirations for recognition. At the same time, another part of the authors' habitus meant that they were genuinely engaged with science fiction. When the Polish field of science fiction began to develop in the late 1970s (Wierzchowska 2015), the post-war demographic boom, as well as the processes of reconstruction, modernisation, mass education and science popularisation, had already led to the emergence of a large group of young people with both a fairly high cultural capital and an

interest in science. To them, science fiction was definitely enjoyable. They did not treat it as an ersatz for the more prestigious cultural domains, even though they may have wished that it was more prestigious itself. This chapter focuses on the search for recognition but that search was certainly accompanied by an attraction to popular media forms.<sup>6</sup>

## Respectable Subjects in Polish Science Fiction

To some people in Poland in the 1970s and 1980s, reading, discussing and writing science fiction involved a critical attitude toward the state, whose failings were becoming more and more visible. A prominent subgenre of Polish science fiction in the 1980s was ‘social fiction’ (this English phrase was one of the names used in Poland). Its authors constructed dystopian and anti-utopian worlds of societies manipulated and controlled by clandestine powers. Those powers, however, were not omnipotent: many characters only paid lip service to the official precepts, at the same time developing creative strategies to have a degree of agency in their daily lives. The plot revolved around the conflict of the individual with the structures of political power. The protagonists, who were initially well adapted to the rules of the world and did not suspect its true nature, would gradually distance themselves from the official reality and learn the truth about it.

Piotr Stasiewicz writes that the subgenre carried out its social and political critique through ‘the language of irony, hyperbole, grotesque and philosophical fiction’ rather than through ‘direct contestation’ (Stasiewicz 2012: 113). According to Antoni Smuszkiewicz, the Polish name *fantastyka socjologiczna*, meaning literally ‘sociological fiction’, was ‘a bit of an euphemism ... [I]n fact, it would have been more proper to talk about ‘the political current’ or ‘political science fiction’ ... [T]he depicted totalitarian systems and the place of common people in societies thus organised were perfectly transparent allusions to the conditions that the Polish reader knew from experience’ (Smuszkiewicz 2016: 376).

It is usually assumed that the initial text of Polish social fiction is Adam Wiśniewski-Snerg’s *Robot* (1973). The eponymous main character, observing the human society by the command of the mysterious Superbeings, comes to the conclusion that human actions are managed by the unfathomable intents of an all-powerful Mechanism. In a more prototypical form the subgenre is represented by the novels of several male writers: Janusz A. Zajdel, Edmund



Wnuk-Lipiński, Marek Oramus, Andrzej Krzepakowski, Andrzej Wójcik, Czesław Białczyński and Maciej Parowski. In her book on women's science fiction in Poland, Maria Głowacka (2018) argues for the inclusion of female writers in this tradition, naming Gabriela Górska, Julia Nidecka, Emma Popik and Katarzyna Urbanowicz. Mariusz M. Leś claims that 'the period of the greatest salience' of social fiction was the years 1979–1989, when it 'became a literary and social phenomenon' (Leś 2008: 73).

Since the late 1980s, the social and political meanings of the subgenre have been discussed many times by writers themselves. At least some of them wanted to criticise not just the authorities and the social system of the Polish People's Republic but the more universal reality of authoritarian or totalitarian states (Klementowski 2003: 238–263). This is yet another facet of the Polish science fiction writers' interest in the public sphere. One of the first publications on social fiction in Poland also suggests that this subgenre influenced the reception – not just among science fiction fans – of such foreign works as *Roadside Picnic* by Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, *Non Stop* by Brian Aldiss and *The Day of the Triffids* by John Wyndham – published in Polish, respectively, in 1974, 1975 and 1977 (Giemza-Żurawska 1996: 107–8). The special place of the subgenre in the contemporary history of science fiction in Poland is highlighted by the fact that Janusz A. Zajdel – the most influential author of social fiction, who died in 1985 of lung cancer – soon after his death became the patron of the main literary prize awarded in the field.

Let us now inspect, in a more general manner, the relevant trends in Polish science fiction in the 1990s, this time represented by short stories rather than novels. I discuss those trends on the basis of three academic works of literary history (Mazurkiewicz 2007, Smejliś 2006: 98–211, Smuszkiewicz 2016: 387–416). The early 1990s saw the rise and fall of 'clerical fiction' (again, the English name was used in Poland), which attacked formalised, rigid religiousness, offering negative depictions of institutions modelled after the Roman Catholic Church or directly identified with it. These texts became popular against the backdrop of the rapidly falling trust in the Church. In the survey of the Public Opinion Research Center – CBOS – in November 1989, 87.8% of respondents said that the actions of the Church served society well and were in line with its interests. In May 1993, in a similarly formulated item in another survey by CBOS, only 38% approved of those actions ('Czy poparcie i zaufanie społeczne...', 2021). The active engagement of the Church in the political life of the country in that period was likely the reason why a number of Polish science fiction writers took a critical stance.

They warned their readers that the Church might lose its ideals and succumb to the lure of power, thus becoming no different than the corrupt authorities of the Polish People's Republic. Later in 1993, though, the parliamentary elections put postcommunist politicians in power, the Church's political interventions became less salient and the trust in the Church began to rebound. This coincided with the decline of clerical fiction.

The abolition of censorship enabled a more direct approach to current social problems and anxieties. Much of Polish science fiction was now set not in the distant future but in the nearest years or decades; not in states and cities bearing imagined names but in places corresponding to empirical locations, often in Poland. Throughout the 1990s writers would publish stories about the loss of Polish sovereignty to the European Union, the conflict of Europe with the Islamic world, the use of modern media to manipulate the population, the ever-present consumerism and the power of transnational corporations, the facades of social life or the atomisation of mass society. They also used literature to criticise abortion and euthanasia, or the rhetoric and practice of tolerance. Sometimes social messages were conveyed through the aesthetics of cyberpunk, alternate history, postapocalyptic fiction or space opera.

Among the Polish science fiction authors writing in the 1980s and 1990s, there was a marked interest in politics, religion, media or ethics. Many novels and short stories from that period attest to the writers' willingness to engage with socially respectable topics. One might argue that plot patterns, narrative structures and stylistic features set these works apart from the more legitimate ones; or that the works described had a lower cultural status because they functioned in the same circulation as numerous other pieces of science fiction, less preoccupied with legitimate matters of interest. But I am not making the case that the works in question functioned separately from other fictional production in the field. To the contrary, I am claiming that their authors aspired to recognition outside the field *and* remained attached to much of its dominant aesthetics. This fission will also be visible in the next section of the chapter, which shows that entertainment (or fun) was often treated as secondary but not rejected.

## The Search for Recognition in *Fantastyka*

In this section, I present selected results from a study of all 361 editorials published in the *Fantastyka* magazine between October 1982 and December 2012, as well as of all 82 columns (in Polish: *felietony*) and all 450 reviews in the January and July issues within that period. I have applied the technique of qualitative content analysis (Schreier 2012), using the ATLAS.ti software. When referring to individual pieces, I name the issue number and the year in brackets – for instance, ‘(10/1986)’. When no genre or page number is indicated, the piece in question is an editorial, to be found at the beginning of the issue.

My methodological approach has been shaped by the theory of Pierre Bourdieu, who observes that ‘the whole social structure is present in each interaction (and thereby in the discourse uttered)’ (Bourdieu 1991). More concretely, I follow Tomasz Warczok’s suggestion that the basic task of a sociological discourse analysis inspired by Bourdieu’s theory should be ‘recognising ... the categories’ that have two key aspects. First, they ‘organise ... the discourse itself’; second, ‘as prereflexive mental schemes, which are in fact an embodied social structure, they enable the smooth reception of a particular discourse’. Such categories ‘tend to operate in pairs ... *sacrum/profanum*, high/low, manhood/womanhood, etc.’ (Warczok 2013: 35).

The section is focused on the textual fragments collected under two broad themes: ‘speculative fiction and other creative works’ and ‘poetics, history and theory of speculative fiction’. With regard to these, I distinguish two types of classifying processes related to the habitus of the intelligentsia – segregation and selection – and I examine the operation of each through a pair of opposite categories. Segregation involved the discursive grouping of works and genres, as well as their creators, users or contexts, within the field in question. The core tension here was between two versions of speculative fiction, problem-focused and fun-focused (generally, the former was ranked higher than the latter).<sup>7</sup> Selection involved the discursive inclusion of works, genres and other objects into the field, or their exclusion from it. In this case, the core tension was between science fiction and legitimate literature (various means were used to signal the difference between them, underscoring the fact that the latter did not belong in the science fiction field).

The material presented below has its limitations. First, it mostly comes from only two authors, Adam Hollanek and Maciej Parowski. However, the two were *Fantastyka*’s editors-in-chief in the years 1982–1990 and 1992–2003, respectively; as such, they represented much more than

just their individual views and they had an undeniable impact on the field for two decades. Second, the fragments on segregation are relatively scarce (in both first and second subsections, I quote most of the directly relevant excerpts collected). Still, I have not observed any similarly pronounced counternarratives, and the conclusions drawn from this material are consistent with the ones drawn from the data discussed in the previous sections.

A important issue in this section is the relationship between science fiction and fantasy. In the 1980s and 1990s the former was the more prestigious genre in the broad field of speculative fiction in Poland (even though fantasy was gradually closing the gap). Especially in the 1980s the word *fantastyka*, which now usually denotes the entirety of speculative fiction, was often used to denote science fiction alone, marking the low levels of internal recognition for the fantasy genre. The corresponding ambiguity would have been difficult to maintain in English, so in each case I have attempted to reconstruct the most likely meaning of *fantastyka* either as ‘speculative fiction’ or as ‘science fiction’. While some of these reconstructions may be debatable, what is more significant is that the core operations of *Fantastyka*’s discourse did not just express a tension between science fiction and legitimate literature. They also expressed a tension between science fiction and fantasy, which played out within the field of speculative fiction. These two types of tension are illustrated in figure 12.1, and capturing them would be troublesome without the differentiation between science fiction and speculative fiction. (The figure also illustrates the fact that the categories in question overlap to some extent.)

<Figure 1 here>

Figure 12.1. Science fiction’s tense relationships with fantasy and legitimate literature

## Segregation: Problem-Focused and Fun-Focused Fiction

Since its inception in the 1970s, the Polish field of speculative fiction was dominated by large-scale production. For instance, the print run of *Fantastyka* reached 167,000 copies in the late 1980s, and though it decreased gradually over the next decade, 98,000 copies were still produced each month in 1994 and 57,000 copies in 1999.<sup>8</sup> From these data alone, one might expect the discourse in the field to put a strong emphasis on convention, topicality, quick

consumption and appeal to the broadest possible readership, in line with the general structure of commercial cultural production (Bourdieu 1971: 85, Bourdieu 1996: 142).

There were writers who expressed some of these ideas as early as in the 1980s: ‘the first manifesto or postulate of the so-called fiction for fun was officially proclaimed at a meeting ... during the Days of Science Fiction in Warsaw in autumn 1985’ (Parowski 2017: 247). However, this was not the main view in *Fantastyka*. The initial editor-in-chief, Adam Hollanek, saw the idea of fiction for fun with some skepticism. His pieces imply that he did not consider entertainment to be the sole function (10/1986; 2/1987) or even the main function (7/1983; 1/1990) of science fiction. He stated that none of the editors would want to ‘wipe out fun from our magazine’ but that ‘we will prefer ambitious pieces, as we have done so far’ (3/1986). He also claimed that ‘science fiction is at a crossroads. Its further creations or, more modestly, further works will decide whether it will belong to significant literature or merely ... to that which serves suspense, and superficial suspense at that’ (8/1987). Finally, Hollanek criticised ‘most ... of our [Polish] young literature’ on account of its ‘poverty of concepts and ideas’ and its ‘undue submission to the intent of providing fun at any cost’ (7/1989).

After Maciej Parowski became editor-in-chief in 1992, he painted a similar picture. Commenting on a story by Andrzej Sapkowski, he said that ‘it is not easy fiction for fun but problem-focused fiction, and with a bitter, unsettling moral’ (7/1994). He castigated the past works of another writer, calling them ‘fiction for fun, adorned, light, leaning toward the fans, toward the everyday fashions’ (7/1995, column, p. 74). And he used a telling disclaimer when announcing a coming short story: ‘It will have a fair amount of fun, it will be fantastic, but also damned problem-focused’ (11/1999). Even more telling was his reaction to the ceremony of the Janusz A. Zajdel Award at the fan convention Polcon in August 1999. ‘«Long live fiction for fun», exclaimed Ania Brzezińska, raising the statuette in triumph’, recollected Parowski in an editorial in which he also wrote about a ‘fun coup’ (10/1999). One month later he published a harsh article *Body Play (Gra ciałem)*, whose fragments I will now quote at length:

This statuette ... puts Janusz A. Zajdel in a role he would not enjoy: a patron of trivial fiction for fun.

... The defense of the end result of Polcon 1999 as an expression of an allegedly authentic *vox populi* is not convincing. A large part of the participants were an audience with low literary competence, that is, young players. Collaborators of players' magazines (Brzezińska's story was published in one of those) were overrepresented at Polcon. As usual in Warsaw, there were many authors *in spe*, who had their own unsettled accounts with *NF* [*Nowa Fantastyka*], and who were tempted by [a fan magazine] *Fantom* with a vision of speculative fiction that is simple and barren, not stuffed with meanings like lamb with pork.

... The readers of Warsaw's *Fantom* would learn about how *F* and *NF* had harmed fiction for fun, even though I was also accused of having printed 'the evidently fun-focused texts by Sapkowski'.

... Finally, *Fantom* published this bizarre whimpering: We wanted to write capably made, smart speculative fiction. This credo turned out to be unacceptable for Maciej Parowski.

... When, like now, there is a great confusion of values and levels among the nominees, and in the fandom there is an influential, vengeful group angry at a picky editor – this simply has to end in harm for literary justice.

Taken together, these fragments imply the existence of five antinomies structuring the prestige hierarchy in the field of speculative fiction – not just science fiction – in the 1990s. These antinomies are explicated in table 12.2; the left column of the table suggests a much closer relationship to the habitus of the intelligentsia than the right one. It is also important to note that Zajdel's works were widely considered to be science fiction, and Brzezińska's story was normally classified as fantasy.

Higher prestige	Lower prestige
Late venerated patron: Janusz A. Zajdel	Young contemporary author: Anna Brzezińska
Zajdel's social fiction	'Trivial fiction for fun'; 'speculative fiction that is simple and barren'
Officially published magazine: <i>Fantastyka</i>	Fan magazine: <i>Fantom</i>
'Picky editor' of <i>Fantastyka</i>	'Authors <i>in spe</i> , who had their own unsettled accounts with <i>NF</i> '; 'influential, vengeful group'

Those voters for the Zajdel Award who prefer literature to games	‘Young players’, that is, ‘an audience with low literary competence’
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Table 12.2. Antinomies of prestige in the Polish field of speculative fiction in the 1990s (as presented in Maciej Parowski’s *Body Play*)

As to the idea of problem-focused fiction, in my material the very word ‘problem-focused’ (*problemowy*) occurs first only in Parowski’s editorial from 1993. The editorial is also notable for its direct expression of the problem of recognition: ‘Both short stories deserve a strong seal of literary quality and of being problem-focused. Of course, hardly anyone will notice this except for fans. In town, as usual, the people who do not read [science fiction] try to present us as the guys dealing with rockets, droids and little green men’ (7/1993). The term ‘problem-focused fiction’ was also much less common than ‘fun-focused fiction’; it seems that it was an answer to the younger authors’ and fans’ attempt to undermine the legitimacy of the dominant taste in the field. This would have been in keeping with Bourdieu’s theory, which posits that newcomers, unable to compete with old-timers on equal terms, see their chance in subverting the current rules of the game. This ‘[h]eresy, heterodoxy ... is what brings the dominant agents out of their silence and forces them to produce a defensive discourse of orthodoxy ... that is aimed at restoring the equivalent of silent assent’ (Bourdieu 1993: 73).

As we have seen, both long-standing editors-in-chief of the *Fantastyka* magazine in the 1980s and 1990s were suspicious of fun-focused fiction. In their discursive segregation, they assigned a more prominent place to problem-focused works. This can be interpreted as a sign of a desire to be recognised as members of the intelligentsia: a social group characterised by, among other things, its attachment to legitimate culture. The editors were not willing to leave popular fiction behind but they did try to define it in a way that would make it more respectable, more recognisable in the light of the socially dominant aesthetic criteria.

### Selection: ‘The Ghetto’ and ‘the Mainstream’

A key selection tool in the field was the opposition of ‘the ghetto’ and ‘the mainstream’, apparently borrowed from the Anglo-Saxon discourse. The first component was devoid of any

overt association with historical ghettos. In its first appearances in *Fantastyka*, in Parowski's reviews (1/1984, p. 51; 7/1984, p. 55) and Hollanek's editorials (6/1984; 2/1985), the ghetto was not yet considered to be clearly more valuable than the mainstream. At the same time, the interest in outside recognition was already visible: 'The fantasts have their man in the mainstream ... Let us look beyond the ghetto walls and see how he has fared' (Parowski, review, 7/1984); '[Science fiction] is still considered by professionals to be a marginal literary phenomenon, despite the fact that ... 'the ghetto of science fiction' attracts crowds' (Hollanek, 6/1984). The tone changed in the 1990s. The ghetto was presented as 'one of the – still rare – healthy places where literature works in this country' (Hollanek, column, 1/1994, p. 79). Speculative fiction was also said to be expanding beyond its former confines: 'We are doing well outside the ghetto walls ... January's *Literature* prints fragments of Oramus' [alien] invasion novel ... At the Literary Festival organised in November by Ex Libris and Świat Książki we were able to talk ... with Warsaw's audience' (Parowski, 1/1997); 'One could say pessimistically: ... a decent fantast has no chance beyond the ghetto ... I am rather optimistic: more and more authors ... are also able to catch the interest of outside readers' (Rafał A. Ziemkiewicz, column, 1/1997, p. 77); 'Speculative fiction is leaving the ghetto, imposing itself as an artistic method on the whole culture' (Parowski, 2/1998). This change coincided with rapidly growing numbers of science fiction and fantasy novels translated into Polish in the 1990s – that is, with a process that provoked criticism from the circles of legitimate culture, which was in turn met with counter-criticism on the part of speculative fiction authors.

As for 'the mainstream', it was criticised already in the late 1980s. Hollanek claimed that 'the contemporary writer believes less and less in his call to rule people's hearts and minds' (2/1987), or that 'the main literature' was suddenly beginning to 'wear out, dry out' (5/1988) and that it had fallen into 'a crisis ... both quantitative and qualitative' (12/1988). He added that science fiction 'is disliked by professional writers due to its popularity' (9/1987). Rafał A. Ziemkiewicz wrote more strongly: 'The vast majority of Polish literature has failed in the last decade ... The most careful reader of 'the mainstream' will not find in it a trace of sleepless nights, desperate surges of hope or the total confusion of minds ... It remains a great merit of Polish science fiction that ... it has engaged with the topics that have been the most painful to the heart' (column, 7/1989, p. 60).



In the next decade, one could read that ‘[t]he main stream of literature did not deal with the current problems’ (Jacek Wójciak, review, 7/1992, p. 68). Similarly, Parowski noted that ‘the intensity of our literary (and social!) life seems impossible to copy in the mainstream’ (2/1998), or that ‘the scale of intellectual shock, satisfaction and challenge which Polish fantastic pieces gave to our readers [in the early 1990s] ... was not repeated in the achievements of the mainstream’ (6/1997). He characterised ‘the mainstream’ as ‘weakened’ and ‘tired with itself’ (9/1999), and he said that its readers and authors tended to look at science fiction with ‘approval’ (2/1998) and with ‘understandable embarrassment’ regarding the genre’s ‘meaningful messages, dilemmas and challenges’ (9/1999). Parowski also remarked on outside recognition, claiming that ‘[w]e have prudent and well-meaning supporters in the mainstream, too’ (7/1993), or that ‘we are sometimes seen as one of the more interesting young cultural formations in Poland, and certainly the most numerous one’ (8/1998).

To conclude, *Fantastyka*’s discourse became harshly critical of legitimate literature in the late 1980s. Neither at that time nor later was ‘the mainstream’ exemplified or defined; it was consistently presented as alien, distant and unified. In the 1990s, the discourse of the magazine stressed the increasing popularity of science fiction as well as its ability to tackle significant social problems. In both respects science fiction was presented as superior to legitimate works, and examples were given of ‘mainstream’ figures who recognised its worth. It is striking that there were hardly any direct comparisons between science fiction and other popular genres. It appears that the attachment to the taste of the intelligentsia encouraged the authors to treat legitimate culture as a point of reference rather than to compare science fiction with crime stories, thrillers or romance fiction.

## Other Findings on the Search for Recognition

The processes of segregation and selection were just some of the discursive mechanisms related to the search for recognition in the science fiction field in Poland. Without going into details in the limited space of this chapter, I propose the following list of other mechanisms, with each point and subpoint represented in about a dozen analysed texts or more. As implied by the presence of these mechanisms, the aforementioned rarity of the phrase ‘problem-

focused fiction' did not mean that related ideas were insignificant. They just did not crystallise in a single stable phrase.

1. Claiming that science fiction is better in asking difficult questions than are other creative works.
2. Commenting directly on matters of public interest (mainly after the 1980s, the period when state censorship mostly prevented the publication of such comments):
  - a. the past failings of the Polish People's Republic and the role of science fiction in criticising them;
  - b. the current political events;
  - c. religion (especially Christianity) and bioethical issues (like abortion);
  - d. the ideas associated with the left: 'political correctness', 'relativism' and feminism (right-wing and conservative attitudes were much more common in the Polish science fiction field than opposite ones).
3. Naming the cognitive functions of science fiction:
  - a. prognosing the future;
  - b. warning against negative scenarios;
  - c. exploring the human nature;
  - d. inspiring astronauts, scientists, inventors, etc., as well as expanding the imagination.

All these issues were related to the habitus of the intelligentsia. Problematic questions, matters of the public sphere, understanding the social and psychological reality – we could use similar terms to describe various cultural domains (e.g. poetry and drama) attractive to different groups of educated people interested in influencing society through culture. The fact that many such issues were mentioned in *Fantastyka* suggests that an important stake in the science fiction field was to present its central genre as at least equal to, and often more valuable than, those domains.

## Conclusions

The field of science fiction in Poland in the 1980s and 1990s was a space of popular culture. At the same time, it was home to many writers, editors and critics who were partly socialised into the taste of the intelligentsia and who thus looked for recognition outside the field, in more legitimate social spaces. While it is often difficult, if not pointless, to make judgments on the intentions of individual authors, on the collective level this yearning for recognition is a likely explanation of why respectable topics were taken up so eagerly in Polish science fiction; why entertainment was frequently relegated to a second place in the *Fantastyka* magazine, giving way to social problems that were deemed more significant; and why it was so important that ‘the mainstream’ be presented as inferior to ‘the ghetto’.

The last point also suggests another explanation. Instead of looking actively for outside recognition, the authors may have tried to convince themselves and others that they did not actually need it. Yet another possibility is that their goal was to affect other participants in the field and find among them a broad appreciation of the values of the intelligentsia. In fact, what I call ‘the search for recognition’ may well have been a combination of all three strategies. Still, they were similar in that they all treated legitimate culture as a key point of reference.

The processes above can be attributed largely to the interplay between the authors’ social background – or habitus, in stricter theoretical terms – and the conditions of the science fiction field. In my interpretation, the taste of the intelligentsia did not fit harmoniously into the reality of popular culture, and the authors’ publishing and discursive strategies were aimed in part at alleviating this tension.

It is important to remember that this is just a part of the story. A full account would show in more detail the ways the taste of the intelligentsia clashed with the taste for popular entertainment: first, in how the same people acted differently on different occasions, and second, in the conflicts between social groups. *Fantastyka* was not the only magazine in the field; its strongest contender in the period in question was *Fenix*, founded in 1990 by a much younger group of editors. In March 1991, the editor-in-chief of *Fenix*, Rafał A. Ziemkiewicz, wrote in a piece *The So-Called Fun (Tak zwana rozrywka)*: ‘Some pitiful flagellation has begun in the SF world: “It’s true, the fun at the roots of SF taints us like the original sin. But please look at us from the high Parnassus, oh you greatly skilled critics”’. He mocked the tone of such authors as *Fantastyka*’s Maciej Parowski to argue that entertainment was, and had

been, not a secondary component but a key part of science fiction. Pieces like this expressed a broader fun-oriented sentiment, although it had weaker institutional underpinnings in the field than the attitude prevalent in the circle of *Fantastyka*.

The story might also continue into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In short, the participants in the field of science fiction in Poland after 2000 became less preoccupied with the values of the intelligentsia. Polish science fiction itself lost much of its interest in the issues of the public sphere (the most important exception being alternative history novels). *Fantastyka*'s authors now rarely discussed the antinomies of 'problem-focused vs. fun-focused fiction' and 'the ghetto vs. the mainstream'. They also rarely described the functions of science fiction or took up overtly political topics.

The main reason for this change was undoubtedly the systemic transformation of the Polish People's Republic into the present form of the Polish state, and the resulting emergence of the capitalist market of book and press (but also film, television, comics, roleplaying games, video games, etc.) in Poland. The values and pressures of the economic field now shaped Polish culture, including popular culture, to a much higher extent. This influenced the habitus of the new generation of authors and readers, and the taste of the intelligentsia – with its concomitant search for recognition – lost its importance in the science fiction field. What is more, the influx of translations from English changed the image of science fiction, weakening its connection to the current problems of public life in Poland.

On a final note, I would like to return to what I said at the beginning. Like other speculative fiction genres, science fiction is largely associated with entertainment and escapism; its history has clearly been permeated with both. However, science fiction writers and commentators have also dealt with subjects more commonly associated with legitimate culture. The case of Poland in the 1980s and 1990s demonstrates that popular culture – here, science fiction – can also be the domain of a search for recognition.

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<sup>1</sup> One might also apply the category of recognition to the analysis of the authors’ career strategies related to non-legitimate taste (e.g. when science fiction writers looked for the best genre tropes to attract the readers whose

main desire was to be entertained). However, here I am only interested in recognition on part of the representatives of legitimate culture.

<sup>2</sup> The chapter is grounded in the research conducted for my PhD thesis, *Taste and Prestige: On the Making of the Field of Speculative Fiction in Poland*. The thesis was written in Polish under the supervision of Professor Elżbieta Hałas at the Institute of Sociology, University of Warsaw, and defended in November 2019. At the time of writing this chapter, A Polish book based on the thesis is in preparation.

<sup>3</sup> I will be using the name *Fantastyka* across the chapter to refer to the entire history of the magazine.

<sup>4</sup> The bios were prepared by Maciej Parowski, who headed the Polish prose section in the magazine between 1982 and 2013. In some cases I have complemented the information with data from fan web portals *Fantasta* and *Encyklopedia Fantastyki*.

The data on gender distribution in table 1 is based on authors' given names, which are generally binary in Poland. The high numbers of missing data mostly come from the inclusion of 36 authors who only published a single story each in *Fantastyka* in the 1980s. There were often no bios for these authors, and since they were not important figures in the field, later sources usually do not contain relevant information, either. Due to this, the middle column of the table mostly concerns the (relatively) well-known, frequently published authors; in short, established writers.

The database for my calculations is available in Polish under the address [http://bit.ly/Krawczyk\\_wyliczenia](http://bit.ly/Krawczyk_wyliczenia).

<sup>5</sup> Among the readers of the magazine, too, at least hundreds, and likely thousands, stemmed from the intelligentsia. In four readership surveys whose results were published in *Fantastyka*'s December issues between 1986 and 1989, the share of employed respondents who had completed higher education was quite high (43%, 26%, 31% and 43%). However, the surveys only provide direct information about a small fraction of readers (the numbers of responses were 768, 1366, 1652 and 563).

<sup>6</sup> A separate discussion would be needed to examine the deeper theoretical issues related to all this. Essentially, Bourdieu's understanding of habitus may not be the best fit for the situation in which someone simultaneously and gradually develops aesthetic preferences related both to legitimate and non-legitimate culture (as opposed to the situation in which someone's previous preferences suddenly become unacceptable – for instance, when a person from a village working-class family goes to the capital to study in a prestigious humanities programme). Elements of other approaches might be needed to form an adequate explanation, such as the idea of cultural omnivorousness introduced to contemporary sociology by Richard A. Peterson.

<sup>7</sup> The Polish terms are *fantastyka problemowa* and *fantastyka rozrywkowa*. To preserve their morphological similarity, I translate the adjectives as 'problem-focused' and 'fun-focused'. However, these translations are more unwieldy than the originals. This is particularly relevant to the latter term, which was used much more often, sometimes in the more general form of *literatura rozrywkowa* ('fun-focused fiction/literature'). In the pertinent quotations, then, I represent the Polish flow of the text with a simpler phrase, 'fiction for fun'.

<sup>8</sup> I have taken the data for *Fantastyka*'s print runs in the 1980s from the masthead of the magazine. The data for the 1990s come from the information published yearly by the national Audit Bureau of Circulations (now Polish Readership Survey). The data have been rounded to the nearest thousand.