

თანამედროვე მსოფლიო მწერლობა პანდემიის პირობებში
(პროზა, პოეზია, დოკუმენტური პროზა და სხვ.)

Contemporary World Literature in Condition of Pandemic
(Fiction, Poetry, Prose, Non-fiction)

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Two Humanity Pandemias in Texts
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Summary

The context of the pandemic evokes the apocalyptic sense to humanity and the corresponding reaction outspoken in thoughts – texts. Two contemporary texts could not be more different. The ghost of the past pandemics, the plague, makes a comeback to a memorable reality in Vilnius, Lithuania. 18th-century traces have survived and could be seen in the wall paintings in the Church of St. Peter and Paul in the form of two figures with bird-like beaked masks between hills covered with the bodies; therefore, the writer Kristina Sabaliauskaitė in her four volumes of “Silva Rerum” awakens this apocalyptic feeling of the global collapse, which had to disappear unavoidably into the oblivion of 200 years old history. The horror of the plague awakens many contexts and develops a dramatic whole of the road of human existence. Meanwhile, another, also a modern but very different text – the reaction to the Covid-19 global pandemic of 2020–2021 by the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek captures the dramaturgy of the void of **panic**, which covered the world and its purification into a “grey zone” – the very last sarcastic “victory” of a communist totalitarian state of China unified into the anonymous global state. Sacrifice and emptiness – the image of silence embodies a medial map of images like the apocalyptic hum typical of XXI century

music and constrains the dynamics of actions. Therefore, two pandemical texts do not cover each other's global context and are "swallowed up" by the depths of the cultural dimension.

Key words: pandemical text, context, Sabaliauskaitė, Žižek, apocalyptic dramaturgy

Sabaliauskaitė's context

Contemporary Lithuanian literature faces an incredible turn toward the historical context of the 17th-18th centuries, particularly toward the times of the Republic of the Two Nations (Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth), when the state reached the apogee of its European development but constantly stayed in the grip of catastrophes, destroying its future. These cataclysms of survival are like the echoing battles in the images of modern Lithuanians. One of the most successful authors of historical prose in Lithuanian literature, **Kristina Sabaliauskaitė (*1973)**, an art historian and doctor *honoris causa*, brought all this powerful discourse to light and led it toward contemporary thinking. Being a human scientist and professional writer, Kristina Sabaliauskaitė has a very insightful and elaborated approach as an art researcher in the ancient environment, enriched with artefacts and testimonies, which is able to distinguish the essential signs of time and the greatness of the intersection of epochs. One of the enriching currents of the historical sources is associated with the mystical horror of a pandemia when, in an elegant, ancient death dance in the style of Rococo step, a plague enters the pulsating life of 17th-century Vilnius. Here, the writer paradoxically "unwraps" enriched with long sentences fatalism of the medieval "death dance". It begins with narration like in a children story about the existence of insignificant innocent animals (cats and rats) that awakens the monstrous depths of nothingness. It is significant how the sanctity of Vilnius – the towers of churches and sacred names seemingly screaming the meanings of heaven, lingers over the system of destruction. This mystique of the intersection of Christianity

and its terrifying demonic earthly background, holiness and disastrous animalism pulsates in Sabaliauskaitė's texts. Here one goes deeper and deeper to the infinity of the pasts, fatally approaching the resurrection of the plague horrors through the conscious and the subconscious, the cities of their yet not governed underworld. A metaphor of the origin of the plague emerges as equal to the details of ignorance. K. Sabaliauskaitė writes:

“Surprisingly, no one could say anything real about that day of the Lord’s year of 1707 whether it was summer or the beginning of autumn, so it was probably that strange time of year in Vilnius <...> the current city governor, <...> for some reason he hated cats very much by nature, so recently he issued an order to destroy all stray cats in Vilnius; <...> with the decline of cats, there was a threatening increase in the number of rats, and they, arrogant and hungry, were no longer satisfied with reigning in the damp dungeons of Vilnius, but more and more often came up to the surface. <...> So it seems that namely on that day, and not later, not after two years and not after three when it hit with huge waves of death, not through the air, as the medics thought, but close to the ground, and not solemnly proclaimed by the signs of comets and prophecies, directly through the city gates, through the streets, as it is appropriate for the arriving stranger who intends to stay for a long time, a plague arrived in Vilnius quietly, without the toll of bells announcing danger, without the trumpets of the Last Judgment, without ceremonial processions, as if testifying the eternal truth that sometimes the greatest calamities begin with the smallest of nothing.

Or from a series of small, stupid, inexplicable coincidences, while that rat was furiously scratching a pink bubo on its side, swollen from the pestilence <...>, the nameless Vilnius cat, perhaps could have turned the course of events in a completely different direction and postpone the fate of the city, instead of raging and screaming in an alien voice, almost in the voice of a slaughtered baby when being tied in a bag, the scared rat wiggled into a yawning slit, somewhere straight into the bowels of the city, into its dark and damp dungeon of guts” (Sabaliauskaitė 2017: 5, 7, 8).

This long text passage illustrates the writer's stylistic dramaturgy linking Vilnius aesthetics with the black mystique of natural powers, the multi-layered movement of past – realities of the memory, the allusion to the irrational interactions of medicine and alchemy. It is like inadvertently invading deep into the contexts of Vilnius' dungeons in playful steps, reflecting the insidious spirituality and the impact on the city's destiny in its own way. This supposedly small detail of an animal, a rat, like an intonational cell or leitmotif in music, becomes a "wizard around the score" – determines the essential actions of structure and change, even if it is disappearing in the dark. This disappearance in the "bowels of the underworld" becomes the key to the mysticism of reality.

Such opening of the second volume of Sabaliauskaitė's "Silva Rerum" inspires the very life/death dilemma that runs through the entire four-volume set. However, speaking about pandemia and catastrophe, here the baroquely varied theme of the plague appears, as if from nowhere, from an animal, from nature or from God himself pushed into the architectural context – into Vilnius space with all its Christian crowns, church towers, names and underground darkness of baroque aesthetics. This hellish frenzy of the names and featured beauties, descending on the bestial catastrophe of the pandemia, gives the context an elegant historical distance and ancient gallantry. It is further mitigated by the **Christian aspect of historicism**, exuding the church incense and the dampness of the monasteries' walls. In this way, indeed, Vilnius becomes real, not narrativistic but full of historical signs of life – birds, trees and tombstones, and beautiful names, the harmonies of which turn into a visual *baroque*. Sabaliauskaitė incorporates the theme of plague into *Silva Rerum* like a bride to the history of Vilnius *par excellence* with her unique expression of time awakening... The black wing of the pandemia covers the vault of the sky in one sweep – one movement is enough for the apocalyptic dramaturgy to take hold.

Žižek's context

Meanwhile, the other contemporary literary text is substantially different and steps into the proposed social context. According to the Slovenian philosopher **Slavoj Žižek (*1949)**, the current society, pervaded

by the “collapse of the world” caused by the Covid-19 pandemia, reacts differently and apathetically, becoming protestingly radical or full of self-guilt... The world succumbs to the fatigue of a pandemia, and Žižek asks: “Why are we constantly tired, burned out in our own being?” (Žižek 2020:20). Because we fight nature and with ourselves... We become our own goal and “projects”. “As a project deeming itself of external and alien limitations, the I is now subjugating itself to internal limitations and self-constrains ... <...> what is today’s figure of superego” (ibid.). What Žižek calls “not only internal ‘struggle against oneself’ against incorrect temptations” (Žižek 2020:21), it seems to be prepared in advance as the dead-end for humanity. The modern world welcomes a pandemia already confused by the war with itself, fighting for a correct message about itself, and this leaves the text without context spread, and unlike 200 years ago, there is no Christian dimension left.

Meanwhile, in Sabaliauskaitė’s texts, it appears as an underground stream of water, washing everything away and highlighting itself with the eloquent contours of memory–oblivion interactions. Like the eternal baroque of Vilnius churches, this depth testifies to the mystery of mercy and repentance, which still has not been swallowed up by modernity. Again, the flow of psycho-archaeology in the literary text focuses our attention on the shadowy grandeur of images and the horror of admiration, in which the salvaging Christian power of the European spirit unites the “dark age” with the present. Therefore, the context of the pandemic does not seem to be thrown into a whirlwind of **panic** but is historically conceptual and coded for the mystical sense of survival. However, it happens in the background of the impending catastrophes.

In the age of global fatigue, as Žižek describes the present, noting that the world comprises endless social workers (caretakers, waiters), some employed or self-employed remotely in front of the computer and those who work in large groups in mass production. All of these workers are endless groups of the world fatigue now trapped in the Covid-19 pandemic grip. For some, it means having even more time for their work; for others, fatigue, unlike the inane “career success”, becomes a consequence of their self-sacrifice (medical staff). The greyness of global fatigue only clarifies the meaning of pandemia.

On the contrary, the 18th-century context in Sabaliauskaitė's literary flow is refined like an extremely suggestive, immortal *anti-fatigue* — the immortality of the depths of the inner history, like a visual image of Vilnius full of water sources of life, and quietly rooted, but now this semantic code has been resurrected above Lithuania. It is expressed in the thoughts of the Jewish physician observing the world:

“<...> the whole city was now like a great red-lit feast, where the Death stayed, feasted, gorged until it slumped from self-indulgence, and even danced with its skirts raised. And there were those who, insane and affected by such horror, wanted to attribute the merits of the outbreak of the plague to themselves, the great Hashemite; usually, they were tramps or otherwise insane <...> as if obsessed with dybbuks. <...> Sometimes his mind got messed up from such satanic carrion of the city teeming with inexplicable evil...” (Sabaliauskaitė 2017: 160, 161)

However, the centre of time becomes the space of the Catholic Church:

“Here Mr. Birontas suddenly decided to pop into church to pray, if only it was open, and Aaron Gordon had no choice but to follow him, so we know that more the commoner is the greater the sinner, the more devout he is, the Jewish medic had long noticed that, and the two beaked figures, one longing for God's presence, the other for the simple chill, because it was hot with those masks and leather cloaks, slipped through the gate, through the threshold and through *Hic iacet peccator* (“the sinner rests here” (Latin) – inscription on the doorstep of the Church St. Peter and Paul where the founder of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania the hetman Mykolas Kazimieras Pacas (1624-1682) is buried), that great soldier Pacas; they went straight inside, the cold and icy and the uniformly white, all studded with sculptures and mouldings, angels, fruits, weapons, soldiers, queens, vagabonds, virgins, babies and old, and Jews were here in certain numbers, and the main one was in the porch and on the altar, these commoners are weird Gordon said trying hardly to concentrate here in prayer, and with those words, both Birontas and he shivered because the organ roared behind them like the Last Judgment Orchestra, and the two

involuntarily flinched straight to the face of a huge white royal Reaper armed with a scythe, **stepping over the regalia of both secular and spiritual powers**, the great Hashemite, what the power can be when death reigns, and a true anthem of death poured out of the organ, majestic, enchanting, forcing to forget all earthly nonsense and piercing through the bones and the brain, and they both, a Catholic and a Jew, each in their own way, stood now enchanted in that echoing whiteness like in an antique chamber of paradise, without thoughts, without memories, forgetting everything in the world and suddenly realising that here and now there is an eternal indefinite infinity opened like a white rose flower with its countless petals and a continuous whole, <...> Mr. Birontas even made the sign of the cross and crossed himself again as he passed by this Reaper, and having gone through the gates of the churchyard into the hot sunny afternoon of the plague, he would have gladly spat if not that mask he wore <...> oh, that heat, that plague, it is no wonder that souls find no peace.

They returned to Vilnius in the afternoon, on the same road, and only when they got inside the city and immediately realised that something was wrong here – the plague guards were crowding near the carpenter’s house, some of them with Jewish-made leather masks – the beaks...” (Sabaliauskaitė 2017:169, 170, 171).



Picture 1. Jewish-made leather masks – the beaks

(Free picture accessed from <https://unsplash.com/photos/DBiExzhMt3E>)

Here, the text opens one layer of the archaeology of memory after another, decodes the gem of Vilnius architecture recognisable from a distance – The Church of St. Peter and Paul, which still shines now as it did 200 years ago, with its crown overshadowing the hungry for the 20th-century darkness and emptiness and plunging into the past modernity. Even the figure of death in the Baroque context seems to be an extremely vital expression of the archetypes of humankind. Finally, as a fateful contradiction to the medieval irony of Sabaliauskaitė’s gallant “dance of death”, we once again turn to Slavoj Žižek’s text dedicated to the pandemic that hit the world in 2020, which shakes the already designed existence of humanity. Žižek writes:

“One interesting question raised by coronavirus epidemic, even for a non-expert in statistics like me, is: where do data end and ideology begin? There is a paradox at work here: the more our world is connected, the more a local disaster can trigger global fear and eventually a catastrophe.

<...> One thing is sure: isolation alone, building new walls and further quarantines, will not do the job. Full unconditional solidarity and a globally coordinated response are needed, a new form of what was once called Communism. If we do not orient our efforts in this direction, the Wuhan today may well be typical of the city of our future. Many dystopias already imagine a similar future: we stay at home, work on our computers, communicate through videoconferences, exercise on a machine in the corner of our home office, occasionally masturbate in front of a screen displaying hardcore sex, and get food by delivery, never seeing other human beings in person.

<...> The abandoned streets in a megapolis – the usually bustling urban centres are looking like ghost towns, stores with open doors and no customers, just a lone walker or a single car here and there, provide a glimpse of what a non-consumerist world might look like. The melancholic beauty of the empty avenues of Shanghai or Hong Kong reminds me of some old post-apocalyptic movies like *On the Beach*, which shows a city with most of its population wiped out – no big spectacular destruction, just the world out there no longer ready – at hand, awaiting us, looking at us and for us. Even the white masks worn by the few people walking around

provide welcome anonymity and liberation from the social pressure of recognition” (Žižek 2020:55-57).



Picture 2. The social pressure of pandemia
(Free download from <https://unsplash.com/photos/EoJULW6P7cV8>)

Žižek’s text explores the powerful social motifs of the nihilistic landscape, the penetrating reality of leftism and Marxism with its social truth, even the reminiscence of Communism. Indeed, in the context of a pandemia, the idea of Communism may return as a natural longing for the unity and solidarity of humanity, a paradigm of a just order. Nevertheless, the language of images here gives way to a stronger image – the media, even to the magic of American films (Q. Tarantino’s “Kill Bill”, “On the Beach”) and the horrific images of Wuhan, to something that connects us to the network of unity and society from what “we are tired,” according to Žižek. Hereby, it is like wandering through the streets of the same maps, with which we are delocalised, constantly fed by pointless media coded as the *emptiness*... The postmodern game of global events in the “Star Wars” style continues via the screen... Meanwhile, Sabaliauskaitė’s text removes the syndrome of recurrence that numbs down the historical sense of the world and allows you to dive into the depth-yearning streams of the

memory sources, opening the emotional palettes to the present, without ignoring the irony of the fate of the situation... These two pandemical contexts by Sabaliauskaitė and Žižek are separated by more than 200 years of the contextual chasm and shocking antipodes of reality.

Catastrophe already dominates in Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis' (1875-1911) works and texts created on the threshold of the turn of the last century Modern.

“There was a terrible heat, grey-yellowish houses clattered their teeth, multicoloured signs shone sharply, here and there the sunny gilded tower sprang upwards, and people, tormented by the heat, strolled like as if asleep.

I looked at them for a long time and missed the meadows, the trees, the greenery, the natural greenery of May.

Suddenly I got up and went through all my life looking for it. <...>

We went a little way down the road. At last, the old man said:

‘Well, I had enough. I cannot go; further, I will stay here. But you go, go without rest. I told you in advance: the heat will be constant; there is no night on that path, only an eternal day. <...> Wait, son, — I forgot: look out from the tall towers, and you will feel the way. <...> Well, go now’.

So, said the old man, and I walked away, looking out from the tall towers (Čiurlionis 1960: 275, 276).

Yet, the tired 21st century remains in the “grey zone” with its belief in the struggle for social justice (and its doctrines — Marxism-leftism) plunging pandemia like any other catastrophe action drama into *emptiness* and the meaninglessness of networking misery, while the 18th century comes alive even in the fields of horror memories with the powerful absurdity of the love for life...

From the juxtaposition of the two texts, the current path to the post-civilisation world, its purification into emptiness, endless fatigue in projecting the future of humanity emerges. One really wants to go back to the past, to an even earlier past than 200 years, to the past, when the vision of Europe was being formed... The Lithuanian writer ingeniously captures

this pulse of life hidden in death by other currents. Kristina Sabaliauskaitė opens the treasure of historical consciousness in the wilderness of the present. She raises the **significance of Christianity** as the source of her ideas, connected with the dimensional consciousness of Judaism. Here, the fundamental paradigm of *continuation of the deep state* emerges. What drives the writer's text was the driving force of existence in those days still untouched by the Russian occupation. And the destruction lies in the horror of human stupidity.

It is repeated in the existential paradigm of the present world, which the eccentric Slovenian philosopher "shouts" about. In the texts by Slavoj Žižek, the *purification* of this doom – the social design of the world – into emptiness and the transformation of the context into a "grey area" becomes highlighted. It is the absurdity of design in the context of pandemia. All are pretty much projected onto the only effective model of **Chinese Communism**. In this way, this text "bends", swallows the context of its language and becomes a rocket – a "word vortex..." flying towards Emptiness. Actually, you want to escape somewhere from such a vortex even to antiquity...

This intersection of texts has one thing in common – pandemia and fear. It is vital because it devours all contexts and holds the narrative of the story-telling bridge to wait for time. Though fear blocks the context, the word as a creator waits for connections of that time. Philosopher Jūratė Baranova writes about the "slipping time":

"And yet the formula for naming time will have to be found, it will be necessary to find the word. <...> Without words, all the irrationality of the world would fall on human's head without any cover. <...> The connection between people, however, proved to be more powerful than the time that destroyed all illusions" (Baranova 2009: 139).

Here, like in the vault of the sky, the clearings among the clouds gap and the stars can be seen... Such is Sabaliauskaitė's "Silva Rerum" Milky Way, which illuminates the existentialism of Vilnius Baroque, its mysticism and its ability to enter the present in the same forms and in its

ancient dimensional context of “backwardness”. The attraction of the past works here in Vilnius and now continues attract like a magnet, which was only partially forgotten, now awakened by the writer’s patience. And it will be everlasting like old city’s architecture, not be replaced by any social project for the just order of society.

The answer to the difference between the two pandemia texts may lie in the depths of the psychological process of artistic creation. Text by Sabaliauskaitė, attributable to the latter action, can recover its pathways over time. Meanwhile, Slavoj Žižek’s text is a reaction of a protesting thinker to the current pandemic, which by itself controls the perspective of time and can only be opposed by science and high technology. Therefore, here the word seems to lose its power; it begins to rely on the media – on their broadcasted images. However, on the contrary, there are many niches to accumulate maturity and expression in art. The art philosopher Antanas Andrijauskas writes:

“Incubation is indeed one of the most important early preparatory phases of the process of artistic creation, in which the course of *the future work of art is formed chaotically and spreads spontaneously in an embryonic form* through the course of various subconscious intuitions, presentiments, insights, ideas, thoughts before the artist’s consciousness is loaded with purposeful rational cognitive work” (Andrijauskas 2019: 555).

Fragments of Vilnius architecture found in this writer’s consciousness “incubation” time root in the flow of time in our consciousness and seem to carry us further... The rhythm of the sentence rhetoric forces us to sink deep into its flow and, without letting us “get tired”, opens different gates ever...

Conclusions

The apocalyptic significance of the pandemia is perceived differently in the texts of the Lithuanian writer and the Slovenian philosopher. The literary works of Kristina Sabaliauskaitė seem to dive into the horrific depths of the sinful dungeons of humanity, and there she faces the dilemma of death and Christianity standing as the essence of European values. Such

style of deep dimension – archaeology of memory in endless sentences revives the relevance of history and seemingly restores the imaginary architecture of values with all its longing and sense of grandeur.

Meanwhile, in his texts, Slavoj Žižek expresses the push of the modern world as a (un)successful thirsty social project as if we are all in a pandemic-highlighted “grey zone” between war and peace, revolving in our circles from which we want to escape. And there is an endless supply of “exits”, but none is the way to “return home”. So, the context remains as homeless behind the city gates – outside the dynamic para-text, isolated in its own quarantine.

The fundamental differences between Sabaliauskaitė and Žižek rest in what the modern world is trying to erase, assimilate, transform into a singularium for the sake of social and supposedly innate equality. They **lie precisely in the genetic heritage of the history of nations**, which is coded archetypically differently in its essence. It is the historical sense of existential threat (*constant pandemic*) of Lithuanian European uniqueness in the face of the Russian Empire, inherited by Sabaliauskaitė as a Lithuanian writer, although she lives with her family in London, but returns to write her books at Pažaislis Monastery near Kaunas, in a beautiful ensemble of Baroque architecture under UNESCO protection. The experience of the collective subconscious of the *both* (or several in one state) nations is like an eternal demiurge of the spirit, fluttering in heaven and nourishing a devoted herald of the destiny of Europe. Žižek, meanwhile, is a profoundly essential Marxist-based social justice fighter in his own way, where paradigmatic lefty of the entire Western world penetrates the minds of the most prominent intellectuals but lacks immunity to *pandemical* Russian dimensionalism, not ruling out a fair projection of socialist and communist ideas. Although both writers are typical representatives of the modern liberal intellectual world, these fundamental differences breathe in their texts. However, an unexpected historical error, like the pandemic itself, highlights the different magnitudes of their genetic heritage and ability to fight for it and the distinctive separate paths of the free world.

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Closure and permeability From Pneumatic Experience to Extra-cultural Insight in the Kairós

Summary

Apocalypse may be defined as the onset of a specific time – *kairós* of Christian eschatology, as opposed to *chronos*, the usual, historical time in which usual events take place. In the specific, apocalyptic time cultural distinctions, categorisations and ways of doing things, belonging to a secular time, lose their validity. Apocalypse is also a suspension of culture. No ritual, no paradigm, no procedure corresponds to the logic of the events that acquire eschatological value. This is why the human being confronted with the pandemic conceptualised as an apocalyptic event lacks not only an efficient bodily cure, but also adequate strategies