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## **Culture war in Polish rock music. Contribution to research**

### **Streszczenie**

Wojna kultur w polskiej muzyce rockowej – przyczynek do badań

Celem artykułu jest przybliżenie głównych założeń teoretycznych i metodologicznych transdyscyplinarnego projektu badawczego: „*Sorry Polsko*”. *Wojna kultur w polskiej muzyce rockowej*. Rzeczony projekt ma na celu ukazanie wojny kultur w tekstach polskiej muzyki rockowej na przestrzeni ostatnich dwu i pół dekady. Wojna kultur – rozumiana jako polityczny spór o zbiorową tożsamość i kształt rzeczywistości społeczno-kulturowej, wynikający z odmiennych źródeł moralnej interpretacji każdej ze stron tego sporu (Hunter 1991, Burszta 2013) – nie jest bowiem domeną li tylko bieżącej, instytucjonalnej polityki, ale jest również, a nawet przede wszystkim, obecna w sferze kultury symbolicznej, której jedną z egzemplifikacji – w tym kontekście szczególnie – jest muzyka rockowa.

Badania będą miały charakter jakościowy. Stosując interpretatywną analizę tekstów kulturowych, autorzy chcą ustalić, jaki obraz wojny kultur wyłania się z tekstów piosenek rockowych i gdzie przebiega oś sporu; jak wojna kultur w polskiej muzyce rockowej zmieniła się na przestrzeni ostatnich dwu i pół dekady oraz jaka jest relacja pomiędzy wojną kultur obecną w tekstach piosenek rockowych a wojną kultur rozgrywającą się w innych dyskursach (politycznym w ścisłym znaczeniu tego wyrazu, np. dyskursem debat sejmowych, społecznym i medialnym).

Miejsce rocka wśród innych form ekspresji kulturowej oraz wpływu społecznego jest szczególnie ze względu na jego dostępność, masowy i demokratyczny charakter. W treści piosenek rockowych zakodowana jest rzeczywistość myślowa zarówno twórców tekstów, jak i ich odbiorców. Rozpoznanie tych treści przybliży nam tę rzeczywistość, tak trudną do uchwycenia, bo często niedającą się wyrazić wprost. Tym samym wyniki badań stworzą szansę na pełniejsze zrozumienie przemian społeczno-kulturowych, jakich doświadczamy w obliczu przejścia

ponowoczesnego. To bowiem właśnie te przemiany, zapoczątkowane w latach 60. na Zachodzie, „zainauguowały” i cały czas podtrzymują coraz bardziej przybierającą na sile wojnę kultur.

**Słowa kluczowe:** wojna kultur, muzyka rockowa, opór kulturowy, kultura alternatywna, edukacja nieformalna.

The main goal of the article is to present the focal theoretical and methodological assumptions of the transdisciplinary research project: “Sorry Poland”. Culture war in Polish rock music”. The project is supposed to demonstrate characteristics of the culture war visible in the lyrics of the Polish rock bands active after 1989. By analysing selected pieces we want to trace the pivot of conflict in this war, the detailed image of the culture war present in the lyrics, as well as its changes in the last 25 years. We also want to research the relationship between the culture war in the rock lyrics and the war of cultures taking place in other discourses (for example in political discourse – like in the parliament debates, or in social discourse, and media discourse).

Culture war – understood as a political conflict on the issues of collective identity or of the frames of social-cultural reality, which emerges because of different moral interpretation developed on every side partaking in it (Hunter 1991; Burszta 2013) – is not only a domain of the current institutional politics, but also – or even more – of the symbolic culture, which finds one of its exemplifications in rock music.

The beginnings of culture war can be traced back to the cultural revolution of the 1960s.<sup>1</sup> From that time on it has spread worldwide and may be well observed in Poland (Burszta 2008; Burszta 2013). In the 1960s American society split into two camps, fostering different world views and epitomizing two dissimilar visions of America as a moral community. The most renowned names of those camps are<sup>2</sup>: liberalism and conservatism (Himmelfarb 2007). The difference between them is built on the relation to the consequences of the counter-culture movements, such as: general moral indiscipline, freedom of individuals, emancipation of the minorities, multi-culturalism etc. This symbolic battle for values became a conflict between differing visions of almost every sphere of life, which is present on many fronts and deals with fundamental questions of power, nation, religion, gender or human life in general. Wojciech Burszta,

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<sup>1</sup> This symbolic decade may also be considered as the beginning of the postmodern transition (Marody, Giza-Poleszczuk 2004), that is why we write about postmodern socio-cultural reality.

<sup>2</sup> Other theorists of culture war write about orthodox and progressist camps (Hunter 1991) or traditionalists and progressists (Sorman 2005). These terms should be treated as synonyms.

one of the first theoreticians of culture war in Poland, writes: "The 'culture' in question here is not a kind of convention bound to a lifestyle choice, but it is a set of key beliefs on the nature of our reality, truth, sacrum-profanum relation or moral life. Culture is a social ethos and a collective credo" (Burszta 2008: 76).

Some commentators have doubts, whether such a clear polarization of the views on the front of culture war is justified (see Hunter, Wolfe 2004; Fiorina, Abrams, Pope 2005). For example Gertrude Himmelfarb (2007) writes that the US is 'a nation of two cultures', because, although from the distance the Americans seem very alike, in the close they are strongly engaged in this ideological conflict. American sociologist Alan Wolfe (1998) believes that the term 'culture war' – understood as a clash of rival ideas – is inadequate in the case of American society, because the war is being waged rather in the souls of individuals. In fact it seems that Americans lead their private lives and are not engaged in any great ideological conflicts. They discuss different topics, of course. But we may wonder if culture war has a real impact on them. Does it have a practical meaning for them? Is it not an over-reality, a meta level, that in fact does not refer to them? But in the end those seemingly abstract issues are part of their everyday life: their daughter wants to have an abortion, their cousin proved to be homosexual, their grandmother obtained a divorce, a local activist burned the flag in their neighbourhood... In this moment, suddenly, this meta level of things goes down, becomes an everyday experience. Culture war is therefore an issue of us all (Hunter 1991).

Culture war began in America, but later spread to all western democracies, in every place where – in the words of Kate Millet, an American feminist – 'the private became the political'. Poland was also one of these countries (see Graff 2008). But this American-born idea of culture war has still not been recognised in our country. That is why our aim is to identify it and explain it in the Polish context.

### **The role of rock music**

Rock music was not only a companion to the culture war, but also one of the factors involved in creating this conflict. Rock music was with the American youth in the 1960s, when young people propagated lifestyles completely different from the existing ones. In consequence the dominating order collapsed and the western cultural reality totally changed (Baudrillard 2009). Referring to

the main arguments of the renowned book by Lawrence Grossberg (1992a) – *We Gotta Get Out of This Place. Popular Conservatism and Postmodern Culture* – Zbyszko Melosik (2003: 21) states that rock music was ‘a form of protest against an autocratic introduction of it in the existing social order’. It was, in the words of Aldona Jawłowska (1975: 207), ‘the most universal means of expression of the youth movements’.

Researchers define rock music in many different ways. Marek Jeziński (2011: 20), author of the one and only Polish book on rock music in the political context – *Muzyka popularna jako wehikuł ideologiczny*<sup>3</sup> – writes that rock is ‘vocal-instrumental species of the popular music, that emerged in the 1950s from rock and roll, country and western, and rhythm and blues.’ He nevertheless noticed that there was no unanimity as to the beginnings of rock music. Jeziński indicates that some people trace it back to the middle of the 1950s (with Elvis Presley, Little Richard and Chuck Berry as pioneer artists), but others perceive it in the mid 1960s, the time of the youth revolution. In the second context the first rock bands are The Beatles (with the LP “Revolver” as a turning point), The Rolling Stones, The Who and Bob Dylan (who began to play electric guitar at his LP “Bringing It All Back Home”, 1965). We consider that The Monks should be added to the second set of performers – a band known as ‘Anti-Beatles’, whose LP “Black Monk Time”, recorded in 1966, is regarded as the first ever punk rock collection (Carrew 2013).

Jeziński justly sees that rock music emerged from rock and roll. But it is worth mentioning that in American research these two terms are synonymous. Such a wider frame for rock and roll is present in Joseph Kotarba’s definition (2005: 1525), for whom rock and roll is also heavy metal, pop, New Age music, the so-called Christian pop and others, stating that rock and roll is the most important form of popular music ever.

In this project we will use the term ‘rock music’ after Jeziński. The main characteristics mentioned in his book are as follows:

- rock music is primarily based on the even time signature 4/4 and the emphasis here is placed on the weak parts of the beat; progressive rock and psychedelic rock sometimes diverges from that rule, like in polyrhythmic songs played with odd signature, written by King Crimson, Yes, Genesis (in their earlier period, when Peter Gabriel was their vocalist), Van Der Graaf Generator and Gong;

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<sup>3</sup> The relationship between politics and music in the Polish context was analysed by Iwona Massaka (2009), in *Muzyka jako element wpływu politycznego*. Although this book provides us with valuable methodological inspiration, it does not refer to rock music.

- distinctive feature of rock music is pulsate, motoric and sometimes, as for Krautrock band Can, trans rhythm;
- rock musicians are often both singers and lyrics authors;
- rock musicians are often young; but in Poland rock is also a domain of people in their forties or fifties (such as Voo Voo band members, Dezerter members, Lech Janerka and others);
- rock music is generally performed by smaller instrumental ensembles (from trio to sextet), accompanied by a vocalist;
- basic instrumentation for the rock bands consists of drums, a bass guitar (the rhythmic section), a rhythmic guitar and keyboard<sup>4</sup> (harmonic instruments) with a leading guitar and keyboard<sup>5</sup> as solo instruments<sup>6</sup>;
- rock music is dominated by electric instruments, whose sound is intensified by boosters (Jeziński 2011: 20–21).

In this project we want to somehow reclaim the rock music space, which is thought to be shrunk or simply died out (Grossberg 1992b, after Kotarba 2005).<sup>7</sup> We disagree with the statement that socially engaged rock songs were created only in the 'hot sixties' in the western countries or in 'grey eighties' in Poland. We believe that rock musicians still oppose the existing social-cultural reality – even if not as a whole, but only in its particular domains, spaces or fragments. We presume that the message of these rock musicians is being differentiated in the same way as the social-cultural reality does, which is metonymically bound to rock music. As the postmodern world has become so fragmented (see Bauman 2011), rock music is not so uniform as it was in previous years. Nevertheless rock music creates and reflects in the same time this social reality, equips it with the proper language<sup>8</sup>, and reveals fears, longings, hopes and values

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<sup>4</sup> We may mention here piano, synthesizer (Moog synthesizers, for example), electric organs (eg. Hammond organ – popular in the 1960s and 1970s).

<sup>5</sup> A good example of the use of a keyboard instrument as a leading instrument is Emerson, Lake and Palmer and the Keith Emerson himself.

<sup>6</sup> Sometimes the basic instrumentation is expanded with other instruments trumpet, saxophone, flute and violin, cello. Some of them can be heard in the works of King Crimson (eg. on the albums "Islands", "Lizard", "Red"), Jethro Tull and Frank Zappa.

<sup>7</sup> In the second half of the 1990s also the slogans like "rock is dead" and those referring to the power of the "new music" were heard at concerts of the Polish hip-hop artists. The co-author of this project experienced it himself at the concerts of bands Kaliber 44 and Paktofonika.

<sup>8</sup> A characteristic example are the neologisms in the lyrics by Maria Peszek, about which female fans of the artist write on forums that they suggest how to express what was previously inexpressible.

of the human world. The culture war seems to be particularly meaningful in the domain of rock music.

We plan to analyse lyrics of the contemporary Polish rock bands in a wider perspective, including the research from different angles or points of views, taking into consideration the fact that culture war, which is defined as a war between liberals and conservatists, is bothered with intrinsic conflicts in both these camps. We try to reflect all the intersect conflicts, which refer to the problems of who we are, and what kind of social-cultural reality we want to live in.

Although the beginnings of a culture war in Poland may be indicated in different ways – Wojciech Burszta (2008) sees them in 2005, when the right-wing party Prawo i Sprawiedliwość took power – we assume year 1990 as a starting point of the period to be analysed. It gives us almost 25 years to be researched; these are important decades after the transition in Poland, when, as Maria Janion (1996) wrote, ‘the fall of a romantic paradigm’<sup>9</sup> took place.

### Significance of the project

There is still a serious gap in science concerning research of the current political, social and cultural conflicts that are present in Polish rock bands lyrics. Only three books refer to the problems of culture war: *Kotwice pewności. Wojny kulturowe z popnacjonalizmem w tle* by Wojciech Burszta (2013), *Wojny kultur i inne wojny* by Agnieszka Kołakowska (2012) and *Wojna kultur. Czy „flaga tęczowa” wypiera „biało-czerwoną”?* by Anna Jawor (2014). Other authors analyse culture war in media discourse or in political, scientific or spiritual debates. Up till now there has been no research on rock music in this perspective.

Our search query gave us only one text devoted strictly to culture war in popular music: *Slouching Toward Bork: The Culture Wars and Self-Criticism in Hip-Hop Music* (Ogbar 1999). It was, however, based on American realities and referred to rap music, which is not a part of our research.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> However, after twenty years of free Poland the researcher still observes the durability of romantic stereotypes, especially the Messianic one, which she critically examines (see Pietrasik 2009).

<sup>10</sup> These two terms are usually used interchangeably, although it would be more precise to talk about hip-hop subculture, which consists of elements such as rap, graffiti, DJing, B-boying.

The Polish analyses of rock music refer mostly to:

- foreign lyrics – as in *To tylko rock and roll* by Jerzy Wertenstein-Żuławski (1990), *Rock a przemiany kulturowe końca XX wieku* by Beata Hoffman (2001), *Rock-kontrkultura – establishment* by Marcin Rychlewski (2005), Paweł Gogler's article *O kontrkulturze i rocku lat 90. Nieuczestnych myśli kilka* (2005) or the aforementioned book by Marek Jeziński (2011) – *Muzyka popularna jako wehikuł ideologiczny*;
- analysis from only one angle, such as in Łukasz Wojdyła's work *Wizja historii w tekstach muzycznych polskich grup skrajnie prawicowych* (2005), Izolda Kiec's *W szarej sukience. Autorki i wokalistki w poszukiwaniu tożsamości* (2013) – a feminist study on the Polish female artists, *Album muzyczny „Sto lat undergroundu” jako tekst kultury alternatywnej* (2004) by Adam Rubczak, in which the author analyses the music of band Kury, *Miasto płci. Dyskurs miłosny Marii Peszek* by Katarzyna Kułakowska or an article *Miłosny dotyk rocka* published by Wojciech Burszta and Waldemar Kuligowski in 2003, in which the authors analyse the relation between eroticism and rock music, or their previous text about Yes (Burszta, Kuligowski 1999: 163–181);
- rock music present in the times of Polish People's Republic (1945–1990) – an article *Tekst piosenki rockowej. Stopnie zależności od kultury dominującej i treści przekazu* by Mirosław Pęczak and Jerzy Wertenstein Żuławski (1991), a chapter under the title *Polski wariant muzyki rockowej* in Andrzej Dorobek's essay on aesthetics and sociology (*Rock – problemy, sylwetki, problemy*, 2001), as well as *Punk rock w PRL-u. O paradoksach współistnienia* by Anna Idzikowska-Czubaj (2011) or *Scena rockowa w PRL-u. Historia, organizacje, znaczenia* by Przemysław Zieliński (2005).

There are also different studies on the reception of popular music (rock music) among young people and its adaptation for the school curriculum. For example Marcin Michalak's book *Muzyka rockowa w świadomości i edukacji młodzieży gimnazjalnej* (2011).

While the research on rock music in Poland is rather scarce, in the western countries it has been analysed thoroughly by many researchers (what is more – often in the political context). One of them is Simon Firth with his books: *The Sociology of Rock* (1979) and *Sound Effects: Youth, Pleasure and the Politics of Rock'n'Roll* (1983). We repeat that there is a serious lack of research on the problem of culture war in Polish rock music discourse. We shall try to fill this gap and show how the culture war which dominated political and media discourse in Poland is present in Polish rock music.

Rock music, particularly the socially and politically engaged part of it, can be considered as an example of cultural resistance or of use – consciously or not, effective or not – culture against dominant political, economic and/or social structures, as well as possibly the use of culture to change them (Duncombe 2002: 5). Rock music as a form of cultural resistance seems to create a kind of ‘free space’ for the development of ideas, the creation of a new language, new meanings and visions of the future in the world appropriated by the ‘neoliberal Leviathan’ or any other dominant culture (ibid.: 5–8).<sup>11</sup> Although we realise that rock music, together with other forms of cultural resistance, is absorbed by this ‘neo-liberal Moloch’<sup>12</sup>, yet we see the driving force behind rock music, which is ‘nibbling’ the body from the inside like a parasite and in this way changing it. We agree with Agata Skórzyńska (2010: 65) that in times of “liquid modernity alternative cultures, different forms of cultural resistance arise not so much on the ‘edge of the world’ or ‘beyond the dominant mainstream culture’, but in its very centre”.

We are not convinced by Theodor Adorno’s demonization of popular music (1994), not even by the harsh criticism of rock articulated by Milan Kundera (1996) and Allan Bloom (1997). We perceive an educational potential in rock music. Using a term coined by Barbara Fatyga (2005), we situate rock music in the field of ‘informal education’, which can be understood broadly as a way of learning outside the formal/institutional education system. As Fatyga notes, informal education is characterised by its non-institutional nature, informal (horizontal) relations between those who learn, as well as by free choice and permanence. We believe that rock music (as an example of an informal education) has a much more powerful ‘educational’ impact than a formalised and fully convergent (linear) system of institutional education (Fatyga 2005: 19–24, cited in: Fatyga, Nowiński, Kukołowicz 2009: 53–54).

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<sup>11</sup> Aldona Jawłowska (2004: 21) characterises the dominant culture in the Polish context as follows: “It is a culture of the majority that on the one hand appeals to the presented stereotypically elements of ‘Polish tradition’ (what is particularly exposed depends on the political situation), on the other hand to the forms of perception, values and patterns shaped by popular culture. So we can identify the most representative members of dominant discourses and the main mechanisms of domination. These are political elites shaping different versions of the official ideology, the Catholic Church and popular culture”.

<sup>12</sup> In the poem “Howl” of Allen Ginsberg, the word “Moloch” can be understood as a metaphor for American capitalism.



## Methodology of the research

According to the delineated problems and theoretical assumptions, we have formulated the aims of research. The central aim is depiction of culture war – understood as ideological debate on the shape of social cultural reality, which emerged from different sources of moral interpretation on both sides of the conflict – in rock lyrics after 1989. Detailed aims are: to establish what kind of image of culture war emerges from the rock lyrics, or what is actually the pivot of this conflict; to show how culture war in Polish rock music changed in the last 20 years; to show the relation between culture war present in rock lyrics and culture war in other discourses (political – for example in parliament debates, social and media discourse). We assume that during the investigation – according to the ‘assumptions’ of a grounded theory, the list of objectives or research questions will be gradually developed.

Our research will have a transdisciplinary character. ‘Paradigmatically’ we have decided to place it at the crossroads of cultural studies and reflexive anthropology.

First perspective provides us with useful concepts such as representation, identity, power, ideology, gender and popular culture (rock music is a part of it). Important for our work is the fact that this last element has clear political connotations in cultural studies. Popular culture is, as noted by Hall (1977, 1981, 1996, cited in Barker 2004: 79) an arena of consent and resistance in the struggle for cultural meanings. The field of rock music may be also treated as a place of struggle for meaning – an area of culture war.

Second perspective proposed here encourages to look at popular culture through ‘reflexive glasses’. We agree with Mariusz Czubaj (2007: 19) that popular culture is the sphere in which multiple meanings overlap and that its description is possible when we use a thick description (by Geertz) ‘where the meanings overlap, intersect and illuminate each other, rather than reduce to a clear response’.

We are convinced that this ‘paradigmatic bricolage’ will enable us to capture multiple contexts of the texts analysed.

Our research will be of strictly qualitative character. The general framework of the study – i.e. the logic of the collection of data (texts), coding (creating analytical categories), writing theoretical notes – we have borrowed from Kathy Charmaz (2009) and her constructivist grounded theory.

We will analyse lyrics using a technique which can be called an interpretive analysis of cultural texts. Unlike content analysis, which is usually used to extract the most often appearing categories, text analysis helps understand how different cultures and people, in a specific time and place, give meaning to the world that surrounds them (McKee 2003: 1). That emic research focuses on the practices of granting meanings that come from the inside of the analysed discourse, from the perspective of a 'native' (in our study 'native' is a rock artist, an author of lyrics).

Speaking precisely, the subject of our analysis will only consist of lyrics that are involved socially and politically. We are interested in Polish rock music that is ideology-oriented.

In this study we shall apply the purposeful selection of the samples, enabling maximum variability and diversity in the sample (Patton 2003, cited in Flick 2010). We shall select works that are diverse in terms of species (such as 'alternative rock', punk rock, hardcore punk, folk-punk, Christian rock, metal, 'national rock' etc.) and themes. We have identified the following thematic fields:

- power
- nation
- religion
- feminism, gender
- existentialism.

Those fields were singled out after hearing dozens of Polish rock songs. These areas are also part of the classic dispute in culture war (Himmelfarb 2007; Hunter 1991; Sorman 2005; Burszta 2008; Burszta 2013; Kołakowska 2012; Graff 2008).<sup>13</sup>

We have constructed an initial list of bands which refer in their lyrics to the aforementioned themes. These are: Dezerter, Kult, KNŻ, Strachy na Lachy, Gówno, Cool Kids of Death, TZN Xenna, Kury, Pogodno, Post Regiment, Maria Peszek, Pochwalone, Renata Przemyk, Hey, Mass Kotki, Świetliki, T.Love, Lech Janerka, Maleńczuk/Homo Twist, Świat Czarownic, Proletariat, Atamico Patibulo, R.U.T.A., Delira and Company, Armia, 2Tm2,3, Lao Che, Piersi, De Press, and other bands from the Rock Against Communism current.

The list of performers will gradually be developed in the course of research, and text analysis will be carried out until we come to a 'theoretical saturation' of those thematic fields (Glaser, Strauss 2009).

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<sup>13</sup> The study of the co-author of the project contained in the book *"Zabijemy was słowami". Prowokacja kulturowa w przestrzeni miejskiej i w internecie* ("We will kill you with the words." Culture jamming in the urban space and the Internet, 2012), in which the subversive practices of Polish culture jammers were analysed, is also one of the methodological inspirations for the project.

In this research the main emphasis will be laid on the study of lyrics. However, for a fuller grasp of their content, we will analyse also other cultural texts that accompany the lyrics, such as: CD covers (including inserts), official videos, music reviews, articles or press interviews. We will analyse these texts using the same technique. The analysis will be contextualised in the current political, social and media discourse.

## Conclusion

We recognise that music, politics and science may be divided only by the means of expression, while the impact on the form of social life is actually common for them all. But the place of rock among other forms of cultural expression and social impact is a special one because of its mass and democratic character. The rock songs encode mental reality common to both the authors of texts, as well as their receivers. Recognizing that content will bring us to the reality of different mental segments of Polish society, that are so difficult to grasp because often impossible to be expressed directly. The symbolic culture, in this case rock music, expresses the thoughts, sentiments/resentments and attitudes, which cannot be expressed in a literal manner, which, however, exist and have an impact on our reality. "Of course – confirms Wojciech Burszta (2008: 73) – cultural war is a war understood metaphorically, but its consequences are not limited to a 'parade of competing representations', but have impact on the shape of the social world, legislative decisions and even on a preferred model of economic development." The results of our study will create an opportunity to better understand this reality, socio-cultural transformations we experience in the face of postmodern transition, that appear and are constantly 'discussed' in culture war, and whose driver are the critical texts that resound in rock music.

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