

Memory as a Battlefield: Julia Simonchuk on Art, Repression, and the Silence That Speaks

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The theme of Soviet repression in Julia Simonchuk's art projects is not merely a research interest but a piece of her family history. In one of the locations—which later became the subject of a film—the author experienced a sense of *déjà vu*, despite never having experienced what occurred in that horrific place long before her visit.

An international conference was held at the University of Warsaw dedicated to Soviet repressions and how memories of them transform into instruments of influence—political, social, and artistic. As part of the conference, a screening of short films and documentaries exploring the memory of repression through art took place.

The Ukrainian artist Julia Simonchuk presented her films **"Testimony of Chaika-II"** and **"Backgrounds."**

A director and researcher of historical memory, Simonchuk—who has authored several films exploring how the past continues to affect us today—says she is interested in political art; art that addresses history, specifically within the Ukrainian context and the context of former Soviet countries.

For the author, the theme of repression is more than a creative or academic pursuit; it is a part of her family legacy. "Like most families, mine also suffered from repressions, but we don't know much because my grandparents were reluctant to speak about it. My great-grandmother spoke of her family in whispers. Even in the late 80s, she was afraid to do so. This is a footprint of those times when speaking was dangerous," the author says. This silence is a common thread across generations, where trauma was transmitted not through words, but through stillness.

One of the films presented in Warsaw is titled **"Testimony of Chaika-II."** Julia explains that the idea came to her by chance when she visited Lukiškės Prison in Vilnius—a place that remembers five different regimes and immense suffering.

"I found myself there during a dance festival. But when I entered the prison, I felt a strange sense of *déjà vu*—the smells, colors, and textures reminded me of the post-Soviet space. Perhaps it was genetic memory at work."

At the center of the film is the **"Chaika-2" camera**, which becomes a witness to history—a subject that saw violence but could not reveal it. "The camera says what it saw, what it recorded—not for us, but for *them*, for the KGB agents. The film is about what remained behind the scenes, the things we did not see." Through this imagery, the director discusses the boundary between documentation and oblivion, between what is recorded and what is lost forever.

The second film, "**Backgrounds**", explores the materiality of memory.

"When I was at the Museum of Occupations, I was struck by the walls—multi-layered, painted dozens of times to hide the traces of violence. I looked at them closely and thought they looked like natural landscapes, like historical layers of the earth," the director explains.

These layers of paint become a metaphor for history that people try to cover up or make invisible. "We only see the top layer. Everything else—the evidence, the imprints—is deep down, hidden. The earth is a container of memories, and it hides them just as these walls do."

For Julia Simonchuk, the past is inextricably linked to the present. "There are many such places where people are still being tortured, where our missing persons, prisoners of war, and political prisoners are held. This isn't just about the past—it's about today," she says. This connection between past trauma and present pain surfaces in all her works.

The third part of her Lithuanian project was filmed in that same Lukiškės Prison, which has now become a cultural venue.

"I felt simultaneously very uncomfortable and intrigued: in a place where people were tortured, there are now concerts and dance nights. This raises ethical questions, but at the same time, a sense of life. Perhaps even hope." However, for the director herself, this hope is not without conflict: "Such places are erased, forgotten. And the memory that the future needs disappears."

Listen to the full conversation in the attached audio file.