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THE FUNCTIONS OF LOCATIONS IN UKRAINIAN RPF IN THE CONTEXT OF THE RUSSO-UKRAINIAN WAR

Abstract

The Russian re-invasion of 2022 has had a ripple effect on every aspect of Ukrainian society and culture. Fanfiction was no different, producing many highly politicized works, particularly in the RPF (Real Person Fiction) category. In this article, the author examines the locations in Ukrainian fanfics of modern political Ukrainian RPF and historical Ukrainian RPF about the Ukrainian Revolution (1917–1921) to determine their functions and correlation to Ukrainian identity. As a result, three primary functions were identified: canon building, relying on references to places directly connected to the subject's public life, as well as constructing hypothetical places in the private "gaps"; relatability, referencing specific details of daily life (particularly during the war) to establish a deeper connection with the reader; and finally, symbolic geography, referring to the especially significant places of war. The last function was the most influenced by the fanfiction author's identity.

Keywords: fanfiction studies, real person fiction, national identity, symbolic geography, Ukrainian literature.

Introduction

Fanfiction studies have risen in popularity and relevance since their inception in the early 1990s, yet Ukrainian fanfiction remains seldom researched, as is often the case with many national fandoms. This article attempts to examine Ukrainian fanfiction through a nation-oriented lens, focusing on markers of national identity. Even though online fandom is usually linked to globalization processes, there is an

undeniable national factor in the existence of non-English-speaking fan communities. For example, there was a surge of fanfiction published in Ukrainian after the Russian full-scale re-invasion on 24 February 2022. According to statistics from the fanfiction archival site *Archive of Our Own* (the largest international resource of its kind), only about 600 of the total 22,000 Ukrainian-language works on the site were published before 24 February, meaning that the vast majority of

Ukrainian fanfiction was published during the full-scale war with Russia. The main reason for this is the mass exodus of Ukrainian authors from previously popular Russian platforms, such as *ficbook.net*, as well as their translation of earlier Russian-language works into Ukrainian. However, this period also saw a surge in new original works, particularly about the war itself, along with the rising popularity of Ukrainian political RPF.

RPF (Real Person Fiction) is a fanfiction subgenre that is based on real public figures rather than works of fiction. While the category is very broad, its core consists mainly of conventional celebrities such as actors and musicians. Even though celebrity fandom might be considered one of the earliest examples of fandom, it is often ignored in favor of more traditional forms, as some find the topic of RPF controversial and uncomfortable. Francesca Coppa (2006, pp. 55–57) notes the historical separation between media fandom and celebrity fandom and explains it by pointing out that celebrity fans once had more mainstream means (such as magazines and other authorized publications) to express their interests. According to her, the mixing of different communities became possible only with the rise of the internet, which resulted, among other things, in the emergence and growing popularity of popslash. Popslash is a phenomenon involving the pairing of male celebrity musicians into romantic relationships, particularly through fanfiction. It is what gave rise to what would later be categorized as RPF.

Unfortunately, the history of Ukrainian fanfiction is less well defined, as it remains poorly documented. The culture most likely started in the 1980s and 1990s with hand-written music zines and the growing post-Soviet fantasy fandom, and around the mid-2000s, it moved online and became closer in form to its global English-speaking counterpart. The main difficulty in studying Ukrainian fandom, especially fanfiction, is that prior to

2014, it was highly interconnected with Russian fandom culture, as many Ukrainian fans (particularly fanfiction writers) used the Russian language and participated in Russian online spaces (such as the aforementioned *ficbook.net*). The situation began to shift after the occupation of Crimea, and nowadays Ukrainian fanfiction can be found on international fanfiction and writing platforms (*Archive of Our Own*, *Wattpad*), social media (*Twitter*, *Tumblr*), and dedicated Ukrainian spaces (*FUM*, *Ficmania*, *Arkush*, *UWURead*). After 2022, there was also a boom in fanzine publishing, although most of these focus primarily on fanart, and only some (*Tysiacha ochei*, *LogBook: One Piece*, *Trigun Zine*, *Litopys Azerotu*, etc.) include fanfiction. That said, the internet remains the primary space for fandom activities; therefore, the study of modern fanfiction is inevitably the study of digital fiction.

To talk about the Ukrainian RPF, there are two phenomena worthy of particular attention. The first is *petliurchenky*, the tendency to pair two prominent figures of the Ukrainian Revolution (1917–1921), Symon Petliura and Volodymyr Vynnychenko, which originated on Twitter around 2020 among recent school graduates and formed the basis for a broader trend of historical RPF related to that period. The second is modern political RPF concerning the current war, which peaked in 2022 and focused on the staff of the Office of the President of Ukraine. These two highly politicized areas of Ukrainian RPF are the focus of this article.

This article is part of a broader PhD research project. To limit its scope, I chose to highlight how the authors use locations and how this interacts (or does not) with their national identity. Before doing so, it is important to establish a theoretical framework explaining how fanfiction (specifically RPF) typically functions.

One of the key problems of fanfiction studies is the relationship between fandom (the fans, the interpretative community) and the canon

(the original “text,” the object of fandom), thus the focus on reception. Relying on Barthes’s theory of the *Doxa/Para-doxa* and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s definition of queer reading, Ika Willis similarly refers to fanfiction as a method of “closing gaps” in the original text. Yet, it is often not simply about deducing what is already implied in the text but rather about making space for oneself and one’s desires (Willis, 2006, pp. 158–159). Fanfiction, therefore, can be read both as a meaningful subversive act of interpretation and as a self-serving hedonistic practice (Willis, 2006, p. 156).

Such theories work soundly when it comes to media fanfiction, especially those whose canon has a clearly defined author. However, it is not immediately obvious how this reader-oriented approach works when the fanfiction deals with real people rather than pre-established characters. I addressed this question in my previous publication (Panforova, 2024). To summarize, the public life of a celebrity can be (and often is) examined through the lens of interpretative strategies that originated as tools of media analysis. The main difference is that the process of canon building becomes more apparent in RPF fandoms: while the fans are always selective with the parts of canon they choose to incorporate or ignore, the public life of a real person does not normally have any author function to organize the disconnected facts into a narrative, so the fandom becomes the only authority on what does or does not constitute “canon.” The strategy feels unconventional but shares many similarities with media interpretation. As Jonathan Gray (2017, p. 264) notes, while fandom is far from the only interpretive strategy used when reading the news, it remains a very attractive way of assigning personal value to a text.

Matt Hills (2003) addresses the issue of reception when it comes to a media text and a celebrity’s life in *Fan Cultures*, as he articulates the difference between a mainstream celebrity and a cult icon. Ultimately, he concludes that cult icons, similarly to cult texts, are a product

of fans’ fascination with the “endlessly deferred narratives” – those that are unfinished, tragically cut short, or in ongoing development (pp. 101, 108). For example, he attributes Elvis’s iconic status not just to the tragedy of his death but rather to the fact that “his demise cannot be assigned a meaning and therefore remains essentially enigmatic” (pp. 107–108).

This circles back to the idea of fans “filling the gaps” of the canon, as the unfinished text remains the most open to further interpretation. It must be noted, however, that the subjects of RPF (even the most popular ones) are not necessarily the same as the cult icons defined by Matt Hills. Notably, despite being a popular character in fanfiction, the political relevance of Oleksii Arestovych was rather brief.

Although Hills’s theory has its merits for our research, the exact criteria for what makes a public figure suitable for fanfiction remain unclear, especially in fringe cases like political RPF. Alison Rowley (2017, p. 383) suggests that some political figures lend themselves more readily to pornographication (particularly through slash, the fanfiction genre focused on male romantic/sexual relationships) because of their already sexualized public personas. Rachel Winter (2020), on the other hand, shows that fanfiction can also be used to construct an idealized image of the public figure.

Abigail De Kosnik (2017, pp. 276–277), while writing about a different subset of political fanfiction, describes how merging a reality archive (the real-world political issues the author chooses to highlight) and a fiction archive (the media the fanfic is based on) allows the author to bring the distant political subject matter closer to the reader. It can be assumed that political RPF fiction has a similar effect, even though it does not refer to a fiction archive.

All the fanfiction works discussed in this article were published online in Ukrainian in 2022 following the Russian full-scale re-invasion. I defined three broad categories of functions a location might serve in the text: canon building, relatability, and symbolic meaning.

Canon building: behind closed doors

Vivid location description was comparatively rare in my exact subset of fanfiction. As most of it deals with sex and romance, the texts are often more concerned with bodies rather than their placement in space. Additionally, the reader is expected to already be familiar with the subject matter, so the scenes can be established through minimal details and intertextual references. However, fanfiction is often associated with affect and affective reading, so the use of certain locations and location descriptors can facilitate this in different ways. I have already alluded to one such function, namely establishing familiarity through intertextual references. In RPF, this process is especially important, as that is what enables canon building.

The Presidential Office Building on Bankova St. is the main scene for the majority of works in the modern Ukrainian politics fandom. Even then, the references to the space may often read as superfluous: every given office room contains a chair, a table, a couch, and not much beyond that. And yet, there is scrupulous attention to detail when such a detail can provide a compelling connection to the canon. *Chotyry istorii pro uliublenyi stilets Mishy Podoliaka* ("Four Stories about the Favorite Chair of Misha Podoliak") (br1_an, 2022) makes said chair the centerpiece of the narrative and the main instigator of the blooming romance between Mykhailo Podoliak, the advisor to the Office of the President of Ukraine, and Oleksii Arestovych, also an informal OPU advisor at the time and a media personality. According to the author's note, the idea for the fanfic started with her noticing Podoliak's chair squeaking during his long-distance interviews.

The other interesting point of focus is the fascination with recording rooms. The actual government work is often referred to in the abstract, and yet there are regular references to the spaces where this or that announcement was made. As an example, *Yoho Prezydent* ("His President") and *Peremovyny ta porady*

("Negotiations and Advice") by Java_Script (2022a, 2022b) make frequent mentions of such places. The reason is quite simple: those announcements, speeches, interviews, and short-form videos were the primary sources of the public life of those figures. The mention of these spaces thus became one form of connecting fanfic to the canon.

Besides establishing connections to the canon, the location of the office room with closed doors may have another intertextual function as a popular romance trope, since it is also prevalent in the Ukrainian Revolution fandom. *Za zakrytymy dveryma* (*Behind Closed Doors*) by ahshty_ (2022) takes place in an office, and the idea of the closed doors is so central that it is emphasized in both the title and the narrative itself: the characters grow close in forced proximity due to being locked in an office room together.

This trope can be traced to the fandom surrounding *Hamilton: An American Musical* with its *The Room Where It Happens*, as the Ukrainian Revolution fandom shares many similarities with it in terms of reimagining and queering foundational historical figures. Furthermore, while it also experienced a surge of works after the invasion, the Ukrainian Revolution fandom was established earlier, circa 2020–2021, and may have had some direct demographic overlap with the Ukrainian *Hamilton* fandom. The more likely assumption, however, is that it originated in the genre of workplace romance, since this genre provides both a narrative engine (lovers are forced together due to spatial proximity) and tension within the plot (the possibility of a closed door being opened, revealing the affair).

Although this genre connection is hard to deny, there is something unique in the way RPF usually approaches this trope, considering the specifics of its canon construction that we discussed earlier. RPF uses the public to reconstruct the private; in other words, it constructs fantasy on the basis of reality

(Winter, 2020). To borrow a metaphor from Ika Willis, the writers of RPF find the space for one's desires in the "gaps" of known history (canon) in the places they often construct themselves. That is why it is so concerned with the hotel rooms and the bedrooms and the closed doors: those are the most suitable for that kind of reconstruction.

Here are two more examples of how this interpretative process works. *Duzhe taiemna istoriia Symona Petliury* ("A Very Secret History of Symon Petliura") by Anni Kityk (2022) accentuates this idea of a hidden history kept behind closed doors, as it presents itself as a lost chapter of Petliura's diary (mimicking the premise of the related biopic). It imagines a brief romantic encounter between the colonel of the Ukrainian People's Army, Petro Bolbochan, and Symon Petliura, taking place while Petliura needs to sign an order for Bolbochan's execution. The fiction (the romance) is framed by historical facts (Bolbochan's execution, Petliura's emigration to France) and enabled by the setting of a closed office room. Similarly, *Interviu* ("Interview") by Iarlian (2022) takes an actual interview with Mykhailo Podoliak and reimagines it in a way that his gestures and microexpressions (probably meaningless in reality) become a secret code meant for his lover. While the location of a room behind closed doors is not fully utilized, the canon-building happens according to a similar set of principles.

To sum up this section, "behind closed doors" is an attractive location, since it is the only setting that can marry fantasy to reality – the perfect "gap" to fill. While this trope is not unique to the Ukrainian fandom, it demonstrates its connection to the wider RPF genre.

Relatability: home front

Even though the previous function colors all RPF creation, some of the location details are designed to provoke reader relatability rather

than reference canon. As Maria Lindgren Leavenworth (2015, pp. 52, 55) notes, the interactions between a fanfic reader and a fanfic writer are much more intimate and direct than in the traditional literary scene. While authors are not always open to sharing the details of their personal lives, the importance of shared experiences is undeniable, especially during the war. One such expression is setting the scene inside (or expressly outside) the bomb shelter.

Syrena ("The Siren") by zemoswife (2022) is a fanfic dedicated to Andrzej Duda's official visit to Kyiv on 22 May 2022 (this occasion is notable for being the first time since the Russian re-invasion that a leader of another nation addressed the Verkhovna Rada in person). The primary location for the fanfic is a bomb shelter, as on that day an air raid siren could be heard over Kyiv three times, and the fanfic provides a hypothetical account of how the Polish President might have felt then. It is particularly notable that the author chooses to focus primarily on Duda and his admiration of Ukrainian bravery, contrasted with his shock, when Volodymyr Zelenskyi's position would be assumed to be more relatable to Ukrainians. Duda's admiration in *Syrena* begins with Zelenskyi and extends to the entire Ukrainian nation. While the focus remains on private emotions, those feelings justify political statements – mainly the need to support Ukraine's fight against Russia to ensure peace in Poland. This is one of the reasons, as per our assessment, why the author chose to highlight the outsider perspective of Duda, as that would provide external validation of everyday Ukrainian struggles.

Pryoyd Kyieva ("Ghost of Kyiv") by Mister_Key (2022) is an edge case in the categorization of RPF, as the Ghost of Kyiv is more of a folklore figure than a historical one. Yet it is reasonable to include it, since the author made a canon-building effort to adhere to the Ghost of Kyiv mythos, including references to relevant news and media in her fanfic. The episode I want to highlight occurs in chapter six: the point-of-

view character, Martyn, goes to buy groceries for the elderly grandparents of his battle comrade (the titular Ghost of Kyiv) but encounters a long line; as people in the line recognize him as a soldier of the AFU, he is allowed to skip ahead. The pathos of the scene gives it an air of wish-fulfilling fantasy, similar to the cases discussed above, but the attention to daily-life detail is rather remarkable. Published in early March 2022, the line for bread is not only a relatable reference to real life, but it also establishes a specific time frame for the events – when the issues with food delivery in Kyiv began as the Russian forces closed in on the city.

Royalties by social_construct (2022) proposes another perspective on Kyiv, colored by nostalgia rather than current relatability. It is an example of an AU (Alternative Universe), a genre of fanfiction that transplants the characters from their native setting into new roles. This particular work reimagines Ukrainian diplomat Dmytro Kuleba as a modern-day Ukrainian novelist and Serhii Kyslytsia, Permanent Representative of Ukraine to the United Nations at that time, as his fan. Fittingly, the events of the fic take place during the Book Arsenal, one of the biggest book festivals in Ukraine.

In accordance with AU genre conventions, each character is given a new biography interwoven with their new circumstances. Kuleba is not just a contemporary writer; he mentions his involvement with Bu-Ba-Bu and the overall provocative postmodern Ukrainian scene. Kyslytsia, on the other hand, is given Canadian roots that he never had in the real world. This is notable because, despite the genre's specifics, it is customary to include references to the character's original background, whereas here, the details of the character's biography are sacrificed in order to facilitate the setting-building.

Such setting building is extensive, as there are not only regular references to the Ukrainian literary scene, but also careful attention paid to the specifics of the Book Arsenal venue.

Particularly, one of the art exhibits – the dark room with only a bench at the center and the speaker system reciting the poems of contemporary Kyiv poets – is an example of a very believable fictional space, constructed on the basis of the idea of the Book Arsenal as an event and as a cultural site. As there was no Book Arsenal in 2022, every scene is colored with nostalgia, and it remains relatable to the readers not through contemporary commentary but through referencing the space that was (at the time) lost.

The Ukrainian Revolution fandom rarely includes such references to daily life. Although many situations have modern parallels, these are seldom conveyed through space. This may be partially explained by the loss of many sites of the Ukrainian Revolution due to wars and the Soviet regime, which made those sites inaccessible to modern readers and thus harder to relate to. It may also suggest that it is the Modern Ukrainian politics fandom that is uniquely suited to exploring daily life during the war.

Symbolic meaning: frontlines

The last category I want to discuss is related to symbolic geography. In times of war, certain locations (especially those close to the frontlines) gain new symbolic meaning in the public consciousness, often relating to Ukrainian bravery and resilience or Russian cruelty. These are places such as Bakhmut, Avdiivka, Izium, Irpin, Bucha, and Mariupol – previously marginal, but now central to Ukrainian culture (Demska-Budzuliak, 2025, p. 75). Fanfiction in my particular subset rarely utilizes these locations as settings for the story, but there are precedents for treating a visit to the frontlines as a kind of symbolic journey.

Svitlo, shcho nikoly ne zhasne ("The Light That Will Never Go Out") by meteolynx (2022) is a modern AU that places the prominent figures of the Ukrainian Revolution – Symon Petliura

and Volodymyr Vynnychenko, among others – into a contemporary (circa 2019) corporate setting. Published in 2022, its depictions are already colored by hindsight and nostalgia, and the final episode of the fanfic is of special interest. The characters of Petliura and Vynnychenko travel to the East to bring food and books to the Donbas villages situated close to the frontline. While Petliura has been making those trips since 2014, it is the first time Vynnychenko has joined him, and his demeanor turns uncharacteristically quiet and introspective the closer they get to the destination. As Vynnychenko partially admits, he is afraid: “Vynnychenko is not afraid of anything concrete, not of the mortars nor some unfortunate accidents. He is not even afraid of seeing the war. He is afraid of that contrast; he is afraid of finding himself unable to put what he’s seen into words” (meteolynx, 2022). This fear is confirmed later, when Vynnychenko is still struggling to put into words the contrast between the liveliness of a busy city (Kharkiv) and the dark quietness of the frontline villages, described as “quiet, tired of sun and war” (meteolynx, 2022).

The theme of the failure of language is emphasized due to Vynnychenko’s literary background, but it has also become more prominent in Ukrainian culture after the full-scale re-invasion. The failure of language occurs as a result of the inability to process a new reality and adapt to it (Demska-Budzuliak, 2025, pp. 78–79). While Vynnychenko is supposedly not afraid of seeing the war, it is the proximity of the places of war (those frontline villages) that causes that fear and the failure of language. Overall, the work is dominated by dread for the future. The road back to Kyiv is uneasy for both characters.

Naspravdi ani posmishky, ani spokoiiy, ani akupunktury (“In Reality, No Smiles, No Calm, No Acupuncture”) by castellansha (2022) does not deal with romance at all, instead presenting a very meditative and self-reflective take on, presumably, Oleksii Arestovych’s early years

in military service. Published in March 2022, the work takes place in 2015 in Eastern Ukraine. The main hero, referred to only by his call sign, anticipates that the situation will worsen in the future. He monologues, surrounded by “Crimean pine trees” against the backdrop of the “faded and sickly, but undoubtedly spring Donbas sky” (castellansha, 2022). Two symbols are combined into a single image, uniting Crimea and Donbas as places of war. We also once again see the East of Ukraine being described through epithets of exhaustion.

The title of the fanfic plays on subverting the unnaturally calm and nonchalant public persona that the real Arestovych built for himself. Even though his character counterpart returns to a place of relative safety, the overall tone of the work remains tense, filled with anticipation of a worse future.

As established earlier, key frontline locations are rarely the actual settings in the discussed fanfics, yet they are often mentioned in conversations. The previous two examples demonstrate that this category appeals most strongly to the reader’s (and the author’s) national identity, but it is also the one used most carefully. Since the tone of most of the discussed works is rather light – despite the dark humor and the underlying dread of dying – reminders of those tragedies might create tonal whiplash.

Yoho Prezydent (Java_Script, 2022a) is a particularly interesting case in this regard. In keeping with established genre conventions, most of the work focuses on developing a romantic plotline between Volodymyr Zelenskyi and Oleksii Arestovych. However, as the fanfic comes to an end, the characters do not end up in a relationship. Instead, the final chapter is dedicated to a discussion of the Bucha massacre. While similar conversations occur throughout the story, this time the supposed romantic tension is gone completely, and the full emphasis is placed on mobilizing anger against Russia. The standard RPF structure of fantasy, built on the basis of reality,

is cast aside to return fully to reality. This places the idea of unity in the face of tragedy as a higher priority.

Conclusion

Overall, I identified three main functions the location could fulfill in the discussed Ukrainian RPF fanfiction: canon building, relatability, and symbolic meaning. The first one is the most common; the second is tied to the other two, as it both helps to establish the setting and appeals to shared experiences; and the third one relates the most to the national identity of the author and the presumed reader. The location of an office behind closed doors proved especially useful for believable canon building, as that space both connects to the public and makes possible the reconstruction of the private. Some of the more contemporary locations served to connect with the reader on an emotional level.

Fandom is a tool for assigning meaning. I theorize that fanfiction is an extension of that

tool, helping to articulate and externalize that meaning. While it can be concluded that works like *Interviu* drastically shift focus from the political to the private, thus diluting the political meaning, the emotional investment fanfiction generates is also undeniable. References to a reality archive (in this case, locations) can serve as a tool to ground the romantic storyline, but they can also themselves become the target of emotional investment.

War can be explored through fanfiction. It is true that fanfiction is often associated with the idea of fulfilling desires, but those desires are not always romantic or sexual. They can express fear for the future, longing for a lost space or time, or an affirmation of one's national identity, heightened in times of war. We have seen some works subverting the expected RPF formula by prioritizing reality over fantasy. However, such works can only be called subversive if we assume that fanfiction writers are exclusively interested in exploring romantic or sexual relationships. Clearly, the appeal is much broader.

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Анотація

Російське повномасштабне вторгнення 2022 р. кардинально вплинуло на кожен аспект української культури й суспільства. Фанфікшн не є винятком, оскільки налічує безліч українополітизованих робіт, у тому числі в категорії фанфікшну про реальних осіб (RPF, Real Person Fiction). У цій статті проаналізовано локації в українських фанфіках про сучасну політику та про діячів Української революції (1917–1921) з метою визначити, як вони функціонують та як взаємодіють з українською ідентичністю авторів і авторок. Серед основних функцій визначено такі: означення канону завдяки відсиланням до місць, що безпосередньо стосуються життя описуваної особи, а також конструювання гіпотетичних місць у приватних «прогалинах» відомого; встановлення зв'язку із читачами через згадки побуту (зокрема воєнного); звертання до символічної географії щодо найбільш актуальних місць війни. Остання функція найбільше підпорядкована авторському відчуттю ідентичності.

Ключові слова: фанфікшн-студії, фанфікшн про реальних осіб, національна ідентичність, символічна географія, українська література.

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