

TOO FAR TOO FAR TO THE LEFT FOR THE RIGHT AND TO FAR RIGHT FOR THE LEFT. BUILDING A RHETORICAL VISION IN SZYMON HOŁOWNIA'S LIVE TRANSMISSIONS ON FACEBOOK DURING THE PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN IN POLAND, 2020

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Abstract: The Presidential election in Poland in 2020 were held in a turbulent time, not only because of the COVID-19 pandemic, but also because of the intensifying political struggle between the ruling party (Law and Justice) and its opponents (Civic Coalition), the 'conservatives' and the 'liberals,' the right and the left. This proved to be a great opportunity for Szymon Hołownia, the candidate who, in the first round of the election, came in third place, after the candidates from the two big opposing parties, receiving 13.9% of total votes. Hołownia's campaign was run almost entirely by volunteers and financed through public fundraising. One of the main channels through which Hołownia communicated with his supporters were daily live transmissions on Facebook. The language and style in these transmissions were not what the audience was accustomed to in political campaigns, and very different from typical public speeches. Hołownia addressed his viewers directly, thanked them and always emphasized closeness, openness, and caring. He pursued a straightforward style, without however avoiding irony, word play, creative metaphors, and similes. On the other hand, as a former TV celebrity, he had to convince his viewers that he is a serious, well-qualified politician, who can comment in a balanced way on international affairs or economic problems. This paper will try to explore the rhetorical vision built by Hołownia in terms of Ernest Bormann's fantasy-theme criticism.

Keywords: *rhetorical vision, Ernest Bormann, presidential election, presidential campaign, Poland, Facebook, Szymon Hołownia*

Background: two campaigns or one?

The 2020 presidential election campaign was the longest in the history of Poland. Many researchers as well as journalists and commentators also describe it as extremely polarized and characterized by the spread of disinformation.

Poland's political scene since at least 2010 has been divided between the right-wing party Law and Justice (currently ruling in alliance with minor

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parties as The United Right) and its main opponent The Civic Coalition led by Civic Platform, a liberal-conservative party. The United Right's candidate for presidential election in 2020 was the incumbent president, Andrzej Duda. The Civic Coalition initially put up Małgorzata Kidawa-Błońska, but after support for her dramatically decreased she was replaced by Rafał Trzaskowski, the Mayor of Warsaw. Other political parties represented in the Sejm also put up their candidates and there were a few independent candidates with support hovering about 1%. The exception was an independent candidate with no political background called Szymon Hołownia whose support initially was about 6–7% and later increased, reaching its height in May 2020 (20%).

Like many countries around the world, Poland faced the problem of organizing the election during the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic. Lockdown restrictions altered the ways in which election campaigns could be run – candidates were prevented from organizing election rallies and meetings with voters and media, both traditional and social media, remained practically the only campaign platform available. This situation gave a favoured position to the incumbent: as a head of state, he could still travel and meet people, he appeared on TV in regular press conferences organized by the minister of health and also communicated via two channels on social media: one as a president in office and the other one as a candidate (Piontek and Ossowski 2021: 60–65). It also has to be mentioned that the state media, especially the national television TVP, acted as a campaign vehicle for the incumbent and neglected their legal duty to provide balanced and unbiased coverage (Bush and Kurzynski, 2020, *Office for Democratic Institutions* 2020: 20).

The first round of voting was due to be held on 10 May 2020. During the two weeks preceding the election the number of new Covid-19 cases oscillated between 200 and 500, with 7–40 deaths reported daily (*Serwis Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej*: n.d.), which at the time seemed very high. The opposition believed that due to the epidemic a state of emergency should be introduced and the elections postponed. The ruling party's plan was originally to stick to the schedule; next, it proposed organizing the election by postal voting (for details of legal, political, and organizational matters concerning this situation see Vashchanka 2020). This was judged to be unconstitutional; nonetheless, the ballot papers for postal voting were printed and on May 7 the Sejm approved legislation for the election to be held via postal ballot. On the same day, the National Electoral Commission announced that by the current legal regulation it had been deprived of the instruments necessary to perform its duties and that voting on May 10, 2020 could not take place (Państwowa Komisja Wyborcza 2020: May 7).

In the end, the election didn't come to pass, which created an unprecedented legal, political, and organizational situation. As Piontek and Ossowski (2021: 63) sum up, "Formally, the elections were held, since no-

one had postponed it, but no polling station was open, no-one could cast a vote, and no legal regulations were in place to organize voting effectively.” Officially, the first election campaign ended on 10 May and the next campaign started the next day.

Finally, the election took place on June 28 (first round) and July 12 (second round), with vote turnout 61.51% and 68.18% respectively, the highest since 1995. The incumbent president Andrzej Duda won 43.50% of the votes, while his main competitor Rafał Trzaskowski – 30.46%. Szymon Hołownia held the third place with the 13.87% of the votes while the rest of candidates didn’t exceed the 10% threshold. The second round brought a narrow victory to Duda, who secured 51,03% of the votes compared to the 48,97 votes gained by Trzaskowski.

Despite these special circumstances the 2020 presidential election was not a breakthrough. Political polarization did not subside and the public discourse on epidemics and vaccinations even deepened the existing divisions (Sychowiec 2020), although the research by Dorota Domalewska (2021: 21) seems not to support this assumption. In this context, Szymon Hołownia’s presidential campaign has been a thought-provoking phenomenon. Its guiding ideas and slogans concentrated on overcoming divisions (“Poland’s a big country, there’s a place for everyone”) and switching to thinking from the perspective of a generation, not the next election only (“Generation, not a term of office”). In this article I argue that this campaign tried not only to introduce a new political option, but also to construct a thoroughly new rhetorical vision, reaching for a new “master analogue.” For this qualitative analysis I use the methods of fantasy-theme rhetorical criticism and the concept of a “master analogue.”

Three parties and three “master analogues”

Fantasy-theme analysis, first proposed by Ernest Bormann (1972), is a qualitative method used nowadays in many fields. The word “fantasy” is misleading (see Nelson 2018: 549), because Bormann’s method does not enter the fields of psychoanalysis or of phantasmatic criticism as described for example by Maria Janion (1991). Fantasy-theme criticism strives to explore how people build and share stories wrapped around facts, acts, and events.

Through conversations, speeches, and messages, people build a shared view of reality that, while not necessarily objective, is created symbolically. People often initiate, embellish, and evolve an explanation of events that can catch fire and chain-out through a collectivity of people. Eventually, such a symbolically created explanation may encompass greater and greater numbers

of people into a common rhetorical community possessing a prevalent rhetorical vision. (Shields and Preston 1985: 102–103).

Thus, a simple act of supporting a candidate in a presidential election can become enveloped in stories. For example, on May 15, 2020, Szymon Hołownia shared on his Facebook (Hołownia, n.d.) a story told by one of his supporters. A middle-aged woman from Radom fell ill with Covid-19; her husband and parents-in-law also fell ill, and the mother-in-law eventually died. In quite a long story the woman tells how helpless and disoriented they were feeling, with no-one to do shopping, to take care about their pets, no-one even to talk to. And then the local supporters of Hołownia appeared: they took care of the family, delivering home-made dinners to their doorstep. Thereafter, Szymon Hołownia himself phoned the family and asked about their health and well-being. The woman concludes her story with the allusion to Olga Tokarczuk's Nobel Lecture: Poland today doesn't need hardliners, but a "tender president."

It is very significant that Hołownia chose this story to share on his Facebook and that many of his supporters did the same (the story has been shared nearly 1 000 times). The vision of a "tender president" chained out across Facebook. This is a mechanism Bormann (1972: 400) wrote about: a "fantasy" comes into being when a member of a group "dramatizes a theme that catches the group and causes it to chain out because it hits a common psychodynamic chord of their common difficulties."

Fantasy themes are therefore small "units" from which more elaborated stories can be constructed.

The dramatizations which catch on and chain out in in small groups are worked into public speeches and into the mass media and, in turn, spread out across into wider publics, serve to sustain the members' sense of community, to impel them strongly to action (which raises the question of motivation) and to provide them with a social reality filled with heroes, villains, emotions, and attitudes.

The composite dramas which catch up large groups of people in a symbolic reality I call a "rhetorical vision." (Bormann 1972: 398)

Rhetorical visions are therefore stories built collectively and shared within a rhetorical community. Such stories create a coherent vision of the world, help to sort out friends and enemies, and assist in dealing with problems. They unite the members of a group and motivate them to act. On the one hand, rhetorical visions strengthen social bonds, encourage cooperation, and help to develop organizational culture. On the other, such shared fantasies flourish in sects and extremist groups; conspiracy theories are good examples of rhetorical visions.

According to Bormann, each rhetorical vision is organized along a pattern in a deeper structure (Bormann et al. 1997: 257). There are three such patterns, or, as Bormann called them, master analogues: Righteous, Pragmatic, and Social. It can be argued that each of the three main political forces in Poland constructed its rhetorical vision according to one of these patterns.

The righteous master analogue is concerned with justice and injustice, right and wrong, legality and illegality, appropriateness and inappropriateness. The world is perceived as a battleground between good and evil. The heroes see themselves as champions of a good cause, defenders of propriety and truth. This rhetorical vision was dominant in the political message (and even in the name) of the Law and Justice party. The dominant slogans of the politicians running for office on behalf of this party were the ones about “defending traditional values,” “guarding Poland’s sovereignty,” “protecting Polish families,” fighting the thievery and corruption of those in power.

The Civic Platform formed its message according to the pragmatic master analogue. In their campaign they stressed the need to modernize the country, starting from new highways, schools and stadiums to new, clearer, and more friendly laws and regulations. The emphasis was on raising the living standard of Poles, on building new infrastructure, and on using the European funds. In 2010 Donald Tusk, then the leader of the Civic Platform, said that the most important aims in politics are not big crusades but “warm water in the tap.” Although Tusk’s opponents subverted the meaning of this phrase and interpreted it as a declaration of abandoning ambitious political goals, they were intended as a simple summary of a purely pragmatic rhetorical vision. According to Bormann, the pragmatic master analogue stresses productivity, profitability, and utility. Heroes who are honoured in these visions are practical, common-sense men and the motives for action are the need for improvement and achieving benefits.

Interestingly, in the 2019 parliamentary election campaign and especially during the presidential election in 2020 these rhetorical visions and their underlying master analogues became reversed. Since the Law and Justice government introduced child-benefit policy (the so called 500 plus) and other social benefits, in the presidential campaign they stressed that their intention is to support various disfavoured groups: large families, pensioners and the elderly, provincial and village inhabitants. Conversely, the Civic Platform concentrated less on the benefits and material gains and more on the defending the endangered values, such as democracy, tolerance, women’s rights, freedom of speech.

The third master analogue described by Bormann, the social one, gives prominence to interpersonal relationships and puts on centre stage friendship, mutual caring, comradeship, cooperation. Some traces of this social pattern

were visible in the 2019 parliamentary election campaign, in slogans such as “Cooperation, not quarrels,” “Strong together,” (Civic Coalition) or “We bring the Poles together” (Polish People’s Party). However, it was Szymon Hołownia who first made the social master analogue the basis of his message for the presidential campaign. This was reflected in one of his campaign’s slogans – “Poland’s a big country, there’s a place for everyone” and was also visible in his calling for breaking the stalemate and ending the devastating duel between the Civic Platform and the Law and Justice. He often called for agreement across divisions, repeating that his supporters “don’t have to agree with him one hundred percent.” However, the social master analogue was most visible in Hołownia’s way of running the election campaign. The whole campaign was financed from crowdfunding and based on the “bottom-up” activities of volunteers. Hołownia didn’t register a political party (his party, Polska 2050 Szymona Hołowni, was registered in March 2022, almost two years after the presidential election). Instead, he initiated a large social movement, concentrating on small-scale, local activities: litter-picking events, tutorials for children in foster families, help for the homeless, supporting people with depression, sending paints and crayons to children in psychiatric hospitals, and neighbours helping each other during the pandemic.

Szymon Hołownia and his live streams on Facebook

Szymon Hołownia, born in 1976, is known to the majority of his voters mainly as a tv celebrity. From 2008 to 2019 he co-hosted the Polish edition of “Got Talent”; he also hosted many other programs in several stations. Fewer people knew him as a journalist who wrote mainly for religious, Catholic magazines such as “Tygodnik Powszechny” or “Więź” or as a columnist for Newsweek Polska and a writer (Hołownia has published almost twenty books on religious subjects). Still fewer people knew about his humanitarian activity – Hołownia is a founder of two humanitarian organizations: Kasisi, helping the children in Africa, and Dobra Fabryka, supporting refugees, the poor and other people in difficult situations in various part of the world.

For a lot of people Hołownia is difficult to pigeonhole. A declared Roman Catholic, often expressing conservative views, he is at the same time a vegetarian, advocating for animal rights and fervently engaged in ecological issues. Although he declared that in his opinion abortion is always a dramatic choice and that he opposes the idea of abortion on demand, he joined the Women Strike protests in 2020 and 2021 against the tightening of the law on abortion in Poland. His emphasis on care, well-being, and safety is accompanied by his deep interest in military matters – this however can have a personal background: Hołownia’s wife, Urszula Brzezińska-Hołownia, is a MiG-29 jet fighter pilot and a first lieutenant in the Polish Air Force.

The main channel through which Hołownia reached his audience during the election campaign were his daily lives on Facebook, during which he often engaged in discussions with his followers as well as with his critics.

The first live stream took place on March 11, 2020, partly in reaction to restrictions due to Covid-19, which made organizing meetings and rallies impossible. During the campaign the lives were held on daily basis, sometimes even twice a day; now the lives are twice a week. They last usually about 30 minutes, although they can be shorter or – rarely – longer. Traditionally, Hołownia starts his lives about 9 a.m. Initially, the lives were only on Facebook, but soon they started to be shared via YouTube. Episodically there are also live transmissions on Twitter and on Instagram. Hołownia broadcasts mainly from his house or his office (a typical background is a bookshelf), but there were also broadcasts from the kitchen, from the garden and from a car or train while he was travelling.

Some of Hołownia's lives have up to 6 million views (as on February 21, 2022). Maximum attendance was over 56 thousand, average attendance during the campaign was about 10 thousand.

During the campaign Hołownia also used other genres, such as live chats, briefings, and press conferences. Once the restrictions were lifted his election committee organized rallies. However, it was his lives on Facebook that set the tone for the whole campaign. No Polish politician had used this form before on such a large scale. In his lives Hołownia commented on current events, talked about his political programme, but often turned to lighter matters: his family (though he never showed his 4-year-old daughter on vision), books or TV series, household chores, his dogs. Hołownia is a speaker with a very distinctive style – sharp and snappy, sometimes very emotional, with spontaneous digressions, word plays, and allusions.

Agnieszka Kampka (2016: 123) stated that in Polish presidential debates metaphors are scarcely used. There was only one TV debate during the 2020 presidential campaign and it didn't offer many opportunities for speakers – each speaker had only one minute to answer a pre-arranged question. However, Hołownia managed to sneak in some original metaphors, for example when he called one of the controversial government investments – the construction of a huge international airport – “a pharaoh style idea.” His live broadcasts on Facebook, with no time limits, gave him the opportunity to show off his style.

As stated above, a rhetorical vision contains heroes and villains, a plot, and a scene. The scene – Poland on the threshold of the presidential election – was depicted by Hołownia as a state in decay, ruled by an incompetent and corrupted government. A metaphor repeated by Hołownia on many occasions described Poland as a state “held together by a piece of string and saliva.” The only thing the government is capable of constructing are “Vaseline factories” (April 29). Normal order no longer applies because the government

is indolent and inefficient. “If you try to plant a carrot with leaves downwards, that is how it ends” (May 11, commenting on a would-be election).

Hołownia more often described his political opponents from the Law and Justice as incompetent and cowardly more than as dangerous and corrupt. One of the most common objects of his puns was Jarosław Kaczyński. On May 8, 2020, Hołownia said for example that Kaczyński has changed “ustrój państwa” [state system] to “roztrój państwa” [stomach upset]. On May 11, commenting on the would-be election, he said that if Kaczyński had ordered the Earth to spin the other way round, Marek Suski would come and say “No problem, boss, I’ll make it spin the other way.” The “anticrisis shield” introduced by the government was, according to Hołownia, more like a sieve (April 6); many times, later he referred to it as to the “anticrisis sieve.”

The leaders of the Civic Coalition and other parties were depicted by Hołownia as entangled in their own inner conflicts and therefore incapable of dealing with this new situation. Borys Budka, the Civic Platform leader, was “grinning with fangs” (May 8), but doing little else. Jarosław Gowin, Kaczyński’s unstable coalition partner, was labelled by Hołownia as a “frog swallower” (April 26). The Civic Coalition has, according to Hołownia, no vision for the future, but “with its big body it is blocking the door, not allowing the rescue team to enter the house” (June 29).

In contrast, Hołownia portrays himself and his new social movement as dedicated, competent, and willing to “do the job” (the phrase repeated in almost every live). Poland under their leadership would play an active part in European and world politics, because in politics there are only two options: “either you sit at the table, or you are on the menu” (June 29 and often repeated). The new movement is not interested in just winning the election – one of Hołownia’s slogans was “Generation, not a term of office.” He often compared Poland to a patient, who needs long-term treatment, or to a child who has to be fed and cared for (June 29). Founding a new social movement was compared to laying the foundation for a new house (June 29), pregnancy and labour (April 26, June 29), and planting a tree (one of Hołownia’s campaign logos was a tree in shape of Poland).

Hołownia was very careful to take his stance between the right and the left, not engaging in the political struggle of the two opposing parties. Initially, he was perceived as closer to the right wing. A declared Catholic, who used to preach in churches, he was easily associated with the Law and Justice narrative. However, as a social activist engaged in helping the starving and the homeless, speaking in defense of animal rights, and a vegetarian, he gained many followers from the left. This resulted also in the allegations from both sides of the political conflict: while some accused Hołownia of being “a Catholic fundamentalist,” others saw him as a wolf in sheep’s clothing, a communist and a Marxist. Some stated that behind Hołownia stands “The Vatican’s Mafia” or Opus Dei, others argued that the ones “behind” him are

George Soros, the billionaire Dominika Kulczyk, or the Ukrainian Secret Service. This resulted in a bottom-up initiative among Hołownia's supporters, who started to use the phrase "I am the one behind Hołownia" [To ja stoję za Hołownią]. The phrase was used as a hashtag, as a profile picture overlay, and on hand-made banners. Later, the slogan was officially adopted by those responsible for the presidential campaign and printed on banners and t-shirts, which is a fine illustration of the "chaining" process described by Bormann.

Conclusions

All politicians nowadays are at pains to shorten the distance between them and their voters. Their performance as "good comrades" on social media is often reinforced by occasional gestures such as going out to a football match, taking part in a charity event, or letting themselves be photographed while shopping or riding a bike.

However, in the case of Szymon Hołownia these were not occasional gestures but an attempt to introduce new ways of communicating with people. When some politicians from the present Sejm and Senate switched their political affiliations and joined Hołownia's movement, they also adopted this style of communicating – with short, "unofficial" live streams on Facebook, films on Tik Tok, and posts on Instagram. This way of reaching out to people, of building a political movement "from below," as well as constructing its rhetorical vision on a "social" master analogue was a phenomenon new to the Polish political scene. This rhetorical vision didn't bring Hołownia victory in presidential election but allowed him to built a large and effective social movement.

An unexpected point of this paper is the result of the latest events in Ukraine. A lot of Hołownia's supporters noticed the similarities between him and Volodymyr Zelenskyy. Both Hołownia and Zelenskyy worked in the media, mostly in comedy shows before starting their political career. Both use (along with other, more official genres) short, hand-held lives on Facebook to reach out to their audiences. Both are very efficient in using a wide spectrum of styles and genres, from snappy retorts through warm, personal addresses, to heroic speeches. Both Hołownia and Zelenskyy also create an image of a politician radically different from that of "elderly, authoritarian, pompous uncles" (Piechal: n.d.).

With the presidential election over, the registering of the political party and the entrance into the "normal" path of political life, Szymon Hołownia and his movement had to work out a new rhetorical vision. The first signals of new emerging symbolic consciousness were already visible in Hołownia's speech on June 29, after the announcement of the first-round results. It seems in creating their "fantasies" the new political movement leans towards the pragmatic master analogue, but the social component is still fundamental. It

remains to be seen whether this new vision will prove effective and successful.

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