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The Vilnius Project

The Time We Danced — Testimony of Chaika-II — Backgrounds

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ABSTRACT

This essay describes and analyses the discourse within three short films — *The Time We Danced*, *Testimony of Chaika-II*, and *Backgrounds* — which comprise Julia-Anna Simonchuk's *The Vilnius Project*. The text introduces the project's background before delving into the subjective realm of the author's experience. It explores the feelings and observations gathered during her visits to Lukiškės Prison 2.0 and the Museum of Occupations and Freedom Fights, which ultimately led to the development of this moving-image trilogy. Links to the films are available at the end of the article.

Keywords: Artist moving image, documentary photography, photography as a document, witnessing, hauntology, collaboration, Soviet occupation, Nazi German occupation, Holocaust.

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Introduction to the project and the background story

Back in autumn 2023, during the first month of my MA course at the Slade School of Fine Art, I gave in to peer pressure from my dance community friends and found myself at a weekend swing dance festival in Vilnius. It was a decision I doubted heavily; I had intended to immerse myself fully in the course. To make matters worse, I developed a nasty flu the day before my flight.

I tried to justify the trip by the fact that, beyond dancing with friends, I was eagerly planning to explore several sites recommended by an archaeologist friend, a fellow history, culture, and dance enthusiast. I knew these locations were relevant to my research interests, specifically the gaze, power, landscape, historical memory, hauntology, and time, but I could not have anticipated the profound impression they would leave on me.

One festival location I was particularly curious to see was a century-old prison complex in the city centre of Vilnius. Founded in 1904 under the Russian Empire, it remained operational through Polish, Soviet, Nazi German, and subsequent Soviet occupations, and continued to operate following Lithuanian independence and eventually closing in 2019. In 2021, the complex was repurposed into a cultural centre known as Lukiškės Prison 2.0.

While most of the interior remains intact, several spaces have been transformed into art and dance studios or serve as venues for concerts, film screenings, and other events.

Another site neighboring Lukiškės is the former KGB and Gestapo Headquarters. This building now houses the Museum of Occupations and Freedom Fights, the Genocide, Resistance Research Centre of Lithuania, and an extensive archive. An eventual encounter with both sites became a starting point for the project I will introduce in this text.

In Lukiškės, at night

Because I arrived feeling ill and far from being in a dancing mood, I decided to join a late-night tour of the prison instead, which was not a particularly wise choice either. Feverish, I followed the group through prison blocks, staircases, corridors, and cells until nearly midnight, listening to a tour conducted entirely in Lithuanian, a language I wish to learn but for now don't understand even remotely. The only words I could grasp were, surprisingly and sadly, Soviet prison jargon.

That observation forced me to reflect on a significantly influenced by Russia, the post-Soviet cultural condition of Ukraine in the 2000s, prior to the 2013-14 Revolution, when I was growing up.

The tour was unsettling — being in this horrifying place at night while freezing — but what was no less uncomfortable was the way the tour was approached; much of the time, the tone felt somewhat insensitive. At the very beginning, we were given 'roles' and asked to answer questions from a character's perspective. We were locked in cells for several minutes, introduced with 'ghost stories' and shown a couple of explicit printed photographs of the consequences of self-harm, along with a variety of objects that prisoners had concealed in their own bodies. My lack of Lithuanian, unfortunately, meant I missed a great deal of information — which I caught up on later while researching — but it also afforded me the 'luxury' of not understanding the most gruesome details of those stories.

Afterwards, I had a brief but informative conversation with our guide. It turned out he had worked as a prison guard at Lukiškės for a few years before its closure in 2019. He recounted discovering the bodies of

prisoners who had committed suicide and recalled the haunting experience of invigilating the empty spaces and locking the building for the final time after the last prisoner had left.

I will forgo a critical analysis of the ethics of memorialization and museumification practices here. Rather, I want to focus on my subjective response to the space.

During the tour, I kept thinking that within an hour, I would leave for good, with a choice to never return. Even as I stood here learning about this as the past, the thought struck me that places like this still exist. In 2023, and now in 2026 as I reflect on this, far-right movements, political oppression, and genocidal wars are again at a peak.

In the Ukrainian territories occupied by Russian forces and within the Russian Federation's own detention systems, the inhumane practices of Soviet punitive institutions like the KGB serve as the foundation for the oppression inflicted today. These horrors are being perpetrated elsewhere at this very moment.

It felt like standing before the corpse of a prehistoric predator, a monster that can no longer do harm. Yet, imagining its victims and seeing the sheer scale of its 'body' is terrifying. A quiet, cold terror of what 'could have been' if not the monster, remains at the back of my mind whenever I study history, read the news, or visit sites like this.

Flight back, reflections and the start of the project

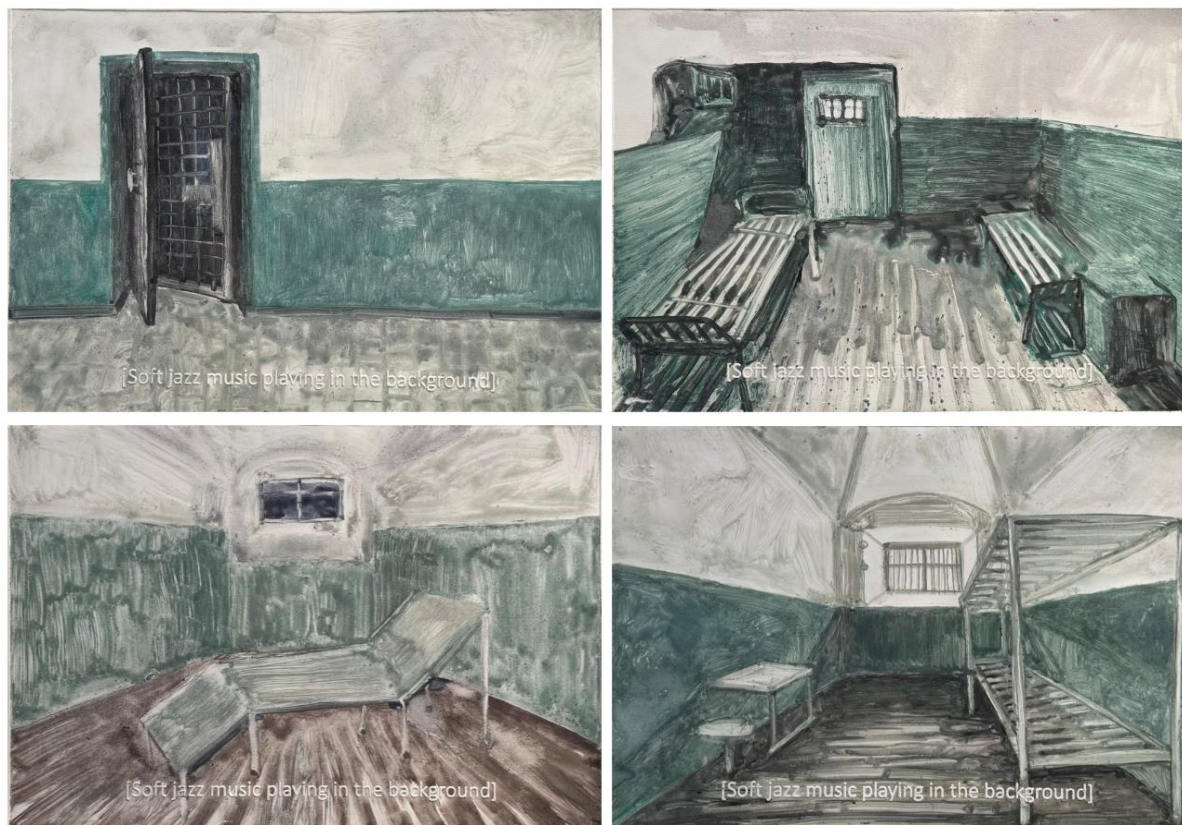
On my flight home, feeling even more ill than on the way to Vilnius, I was haunted by conflicting feelings about these complex and charged spaces. Fascination and unease merged into a paradox, the kind of rich territory that often provides a powerful impetus for creative or research inquiry. While contradiction is inherently bewildering and anxiety-inducing, I find myself, paradoxically, drawn to it; it aligns perfectly with my interest in the uncanny.

This duality — this coexistence of past and present — manifested in the music they play on the dance socials. The swing music, popular in the 1920s through the 1940s, was likely never heard within the walls of Lukiškės during those decades. Jazz, which originated in the Black community in the US as a response to systemic discrimination and oppression, has its own complex history and association with resistance through joy in the twentieth century. It now finds the way into a formerly oppressive institution and is transforming it into a place of freedom, while the interiors stay mostly intact. It becomes a kind of memento, making the sense of freedom ephemeral. Jazz was favoured neither in Nazi Germany nor in the Soviet Union. To hear it there now creates an eerie temporal dissonance.

The Time We Danced

I began searching for a way to address this ethical and temporal tension and reflect on the experience. For a long time, I had wanted to work with video but felt too intimidated to try; however, this project finally pushed me toward moving image. A time-based medium felt the most relevant, as my ideas revolve around the cyclical nature of history and a past that continues to haunt physical spaces and objects.

The decision to use this medium did not happen immediately. I first approached the project through image-making, creating a series of monoprints depicting prison cells and corridors. My references were a blend of open-source images, sketches made during a couple of guided tours I attended, and my own visual memory of the visits. Although these works were not time-based, I applied the language of cinema to them: at the bottom of each image, embossed in square brackets like a subtitle, was the phrase: "[Soft jazz playing in the background]."



Soft Jazz Music Playing in the Background (2022). Monoprint, A3

In this work, the architecture and the music are equal actors; their coexistence creates the conflict at the core of the series. Yet, the music remains only implied, left entirely to the viewer's imagination. While this series is a self-sufficient body of work, it functioned almost as a storyboard for my film, encapsulating the central principle of the project, which is a subject or a key actor that is hauntingly implied but never truly present.

Research and preparation for *The Time We Danced*

I conducted formal interviews with local dancers regarding their experiences of being in Lukiškės and, specifically, social dancing there on a regular basis. I aimed to approach these conversations with curiosity and without judgment, seeking to understand their perspectives while simultaneously observing my own emotional responses to the space. Many of my interviewees noted that the initial shock and discomfort from dancing in the former prison with time vanished and Lukiškės started to feel like just another like another location and positive associations with the site would grow regardless of whether they remembered the location in its previous state or now.

Reflections on the experience

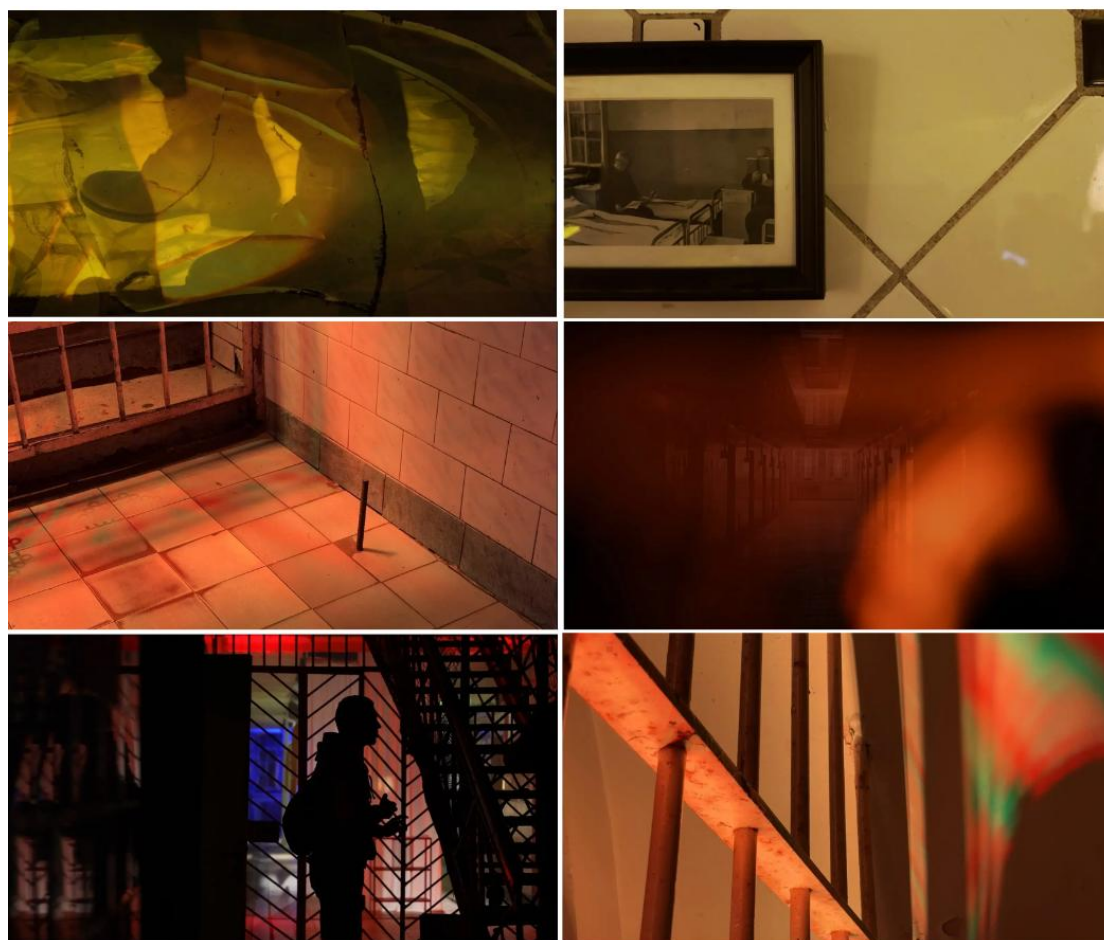
I had the opportunity to dance in Lukiškės myself a few times as well. When I entered the well-lit, circular room and was asked for a dance, there were moments when I truly forgot where I was; my thoughts were no longer occupied by the Gestapo, the KGB, or the inmates who had served life sentences just one level below the dance floor. However, the moment I stepped outside to catch my breath, the reality returned. I was immediately surrounded by stairs and endless corridors of cells, some left almost exactly as they were the day the prison closed. In the space of a single breath — sipping water, checking my phone, or engaging in small talk — I would then step back into the round room, transformed once again by swing music, cheerful chatter, and warm lighting.

About the film

The film is non-linear and plotless, driven instead by a specific dynamic. The audience is first introduced to the prison's physical spaces. Eventually, music emerges. After familiarising the viewer with the environment, I confront them with a deliberate audiovisual dissonance.

The music stops abruptly, and close-ups of dancers in motion, ephemeral and never fully in frame, are met with the historical sounds of Lukiškės; the slamming of heavy iron doors, the ambient echoes of the cells, the jangling of keys, and approaching footsteps in the corridors. These are the sounds this place 'knew' for the majority of its existence. Finally, the dancers become increasingly ephemeral until they are swept away entirely, like themselves as 'ghosts-to-be', leaving only the empty dance room remaining in the frame.

The concept of hauntology, coined by Jacques Derrida and addressed in *Spectres of Marx* (1994), was one of the key concepts in my framework of thinking for this project. Another significant influence was Kubrick's adaptation of *The Shining* (1980), especially the grand party scene at the Gold Ballroom in the empty Overlook Hotel. My work similarly incorporates the idea of presence when there should be absence as well as the gradual reveal: Jack is walking along a corridor and hears *Midnight, Stars and You* by Al Bowly. The music leads him to the buzzing lavish ballroom full of guests (the hotel is empty) and suddenly it's not the 1980s but the 1920s; an eternal, idealised 1920s (Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life*).



The Time We Danced (2025). Short film, 05:40

Museum of Occupations and Freedom Fights

The other two films – *Testimony of Chaika-II* and *Backgrounds* are responses to the Museum of Occupations and Freedom Fights in Vilnius, Lithuania, the former headquarters of the KGB and Gestapo.

Stepping into the museum's basement, formerly a detention centre, for the first time, I felt quiet but powerful anger, grief, and floating questions of 'what ifs' and 'if onlys'. I sensed the likeness of experience of oppressions both Ukraine and Lithuania faced in the twentieth century. A strong sense of déjà-vu was also present. The smell, the colours, the textures on the walls — it all felt oddly familiar. Often this colour is referred to as the 'Soviet Green'.

After that visit, I had a nightmare about corridors, a bit like Monika Sosnowska's installation [The Corridor](#) (2001), in which two colour block walls are purposefully made grotesquely narrow to highlight and enhance the typical claustrophobic feeling of institutional interiors. I ran around a labyrinth of painted corridors not knowing if this place posed a threat or not. Is it a kindergarten? Is it a hospital? A mental institution? Is it a prison? Is it inside of a residential building? Is it in the past or in the present?

Backgrounds

The film is an attempt to address emotionally charged stories and histories through the language that, on the surface, could be seen as abstract.

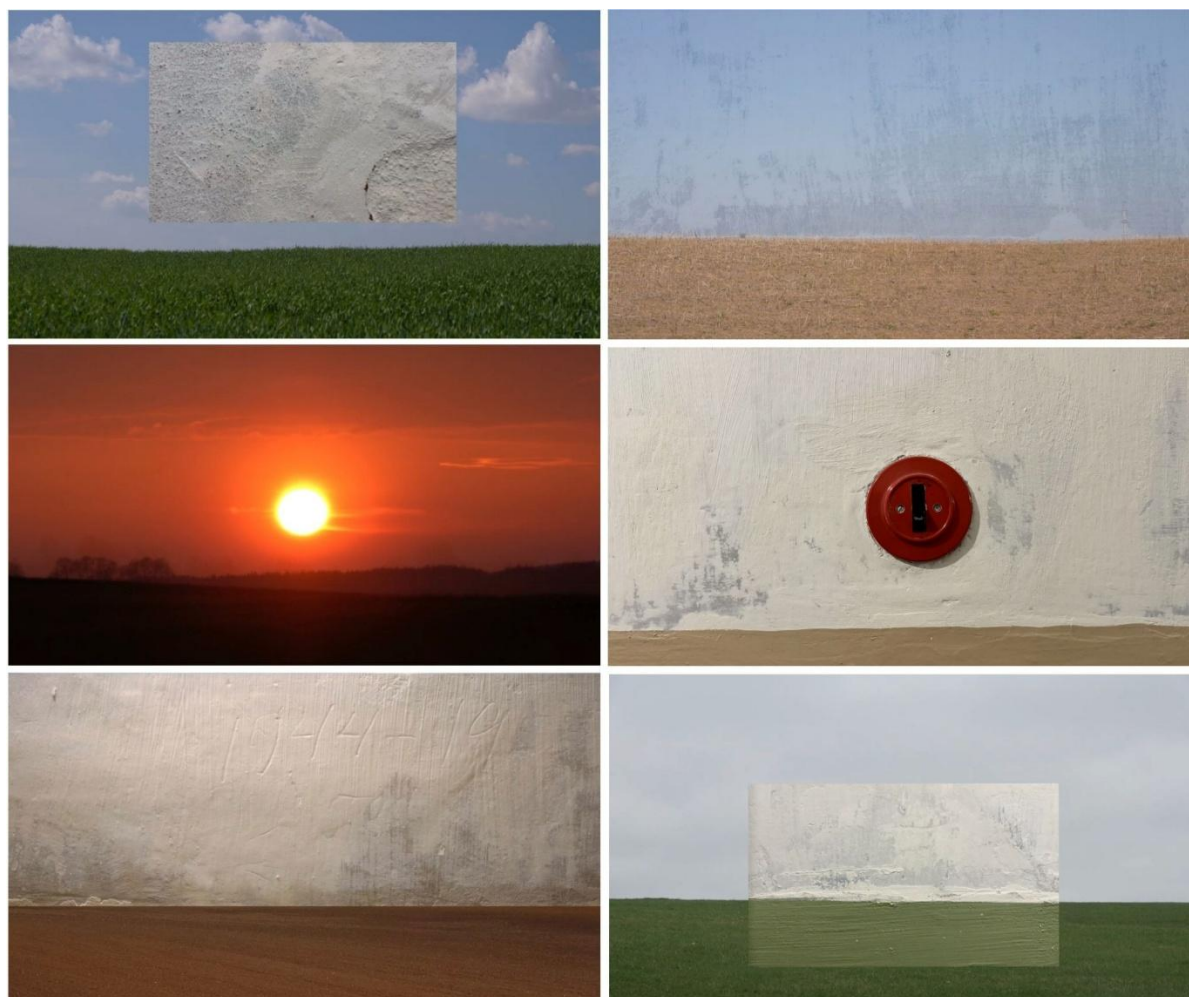
The cells and corridors have typical institutional walls, divided into two colour sections. When encountered up close, the boundary where one colour meets the other resembles an austere, deserted field. Much like how palimpsests of earth preserve evidence of violence, the layers of paint on these walls — repainted up to twenty times to cover blood and inscriptions — serve as a physical archive of the past: an archive that is hidden and thus can only be imagined.

The 'landscapes' on the walls slowly cross-dissolve with the actual landscapes filmed near Paneriai, Ninth Fort and Głitiškės massacre memorials near Vilnius and Kaunas.

What the viewer sees is merely the surface — the most recent layer of both the walls and the physical environment. In the film, the actual memorials are kept out of frame, leaving the fields looking hauntingly anonymous. However, the walls reveal significantly more; they bear inscriptions from the years of the Soviet occupation and the names of those detained within the premises.

I am, of course, aware of the criticisms regarding memory politics in Lithuania, specifically the emphasis placed on the suffering of ethnic Lithuanians while the history of collaboration — with both the Soviets and the Nazis — is often under-acknowledged. While I do not address this explicitly in the films, in *Backgrounds*, many of the locations are connected to the Holocaust.

The landscapes were filmed near memorials dedicated to the Roma, Polish people, and other ethnic and political groups targeted during the 1940s. A comprehensive analysis of the Baltic and particularly Lithuanian memory politics discourse could be found in the works of Lithuanian scholars Violeta Davoliūtė and Neringa Klumbytė.



Backgrounds (2025). Short film, 06:39

Testimony of Chaika-II

In the film *Testimony of Chaika-II*, the protagonist and narrator is an old photo camera produced in the 1960-70s, which is granted a voice and subjectivity. Chaika-II is one of the artefacts from the museum collection. The camera is haunted by an afterimage of what it saw but could not capture. Through its narration, Chaika-II is reflecting on the uses of technology, nature of documentary photography, as well as agency and complicity.

Within the museum, there is a wall of explicit photographs depicting tortured Lithuanian partisans. I knew instinctively that I did not want to include these images in the film. This was partly for ethical reasons, but also out of an understanding that modern audiences have become desensitized.

Often, such imagery is so common that it fails to evoke empathy or provoke action. It becomes a commentary on how 'shocking' images frequently fail to fulfil their intended purpose, an idea famously explored by Susan Sontag and Roland Barthes.

The choice of not showing the photographs was also influenced by Jonathan Glazer's *The Zone of Interest* (2023), in which the horrors are central to the film yet remain on the periphery. Consequently, while the film centres on documentary photography and the 'photograph as document', no actual photographs are featured. The key subject is intentionally 'left behind the frame'.



Testimony of Chaika-II (2025). Short film; 03:40

Conclusion

Although I had the choice never to return to Lukiškės, I found myself traveling back to Lithuania more than five times over the two years I worked on this project. Throughout this period, I developed a deeper understanding of the Lithuanian historical context, internalising the project through academic research and museum visits, but also through visceral sensory experiences— the temperature, smells, movement, and music in the sites.

Beyond their shared geography and history, these three films are united by a common paradox: while they are ultimately about people, they deliberately lack a literal human presence. Instead, they operate within the realm of objects and artefacts.

In *The Time We Danced*, the presence of human subjects ‘dances’ with their inevitable absence; in *Testimony of Chaika-II*, a voice is granted to an inanimate object that has long been silenced; and in *Backgrounds*, human presence is reduced to mere hints, allowing the film to be read as the interior perspective of an inmate staring at institutional walls while imagining the natural landscapes beyond.

Ultimately, the project is united by an exploration of gaps, ‘grey areas’, and that which remains unseen. I recognize that addressing these voids requires a high degree of responsibility and care; through these films, I am not attempting to provide definitive answers. Although this specific project is now complete, I feel a

continued urgency to address the complexities of memorialisation, the cyclical nature of history, and the collective trauma of the region through my future work.

Links to the films:

[The Time We Danced](#)

[Backgrounds](#)

[Testimony of Chaika-II](#)

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