

**Bogusław Bakula, Dobrochna Dabert and Emilia Kledzik, eds. *Comparisons and Contexts. Essays on Central-Eastern European Literature and Culture*. Poznań: Biblioteka Porównań, 2015**

As a collective volume, *Comparisons and Contexts. Essays on Central-Eastern European Literature and Culture* brings together contributors specialized in the field of Central and Eastern European literature and culture. Their articles are grouped into three separate sections on methodological and thematic grounds: “The Comparative Perspective”, “The Postcolonial and Postmodern Perspective” and “The Interdisciplinary Perspective”. However, the last section, by far the most eclectic (touching upon artistic, cinematographic and architectural trends), could just as well have been labeled “comparativism and the arts”, since all the other articles of the volume are to a large extent interdisciplinary as well.

The first section hosts two of the most comprehensive and informed articles. Bogusław Bakula's “Towards Integral Comparative Studies” offers an exhaustive analysis of the field of comparative studies and makes the claim that, rather than being a mere “metatheory” (14), “the aim of comparative studies” is also “to raise cultural and ethnic identity awareness” (17). Other topics explored by comparative studies are axiology, nationality and literary notions (15). Bakula also discusses the notion of integral comparative studies, which emphasizes “the importance of national traditions” (20). Highlighting the poverty of nationalism, Bakula affirms that “from time to time it perkily waves the national flags, but mostly it boils down to a certain cultural autism” (20). The opposite of cultural autism is deemed to be cultural nomadism, which is “change-oriented, inclined toward constant revaluation” (20). Moreover, cultural nomadism could be felicitously linked with what Bakula dubs the post-canon in his other article from the third section of the volume: “the post-canon is not created for or against tradition but alongside it” (246). In another substantive contribution to the first section, Pawel Wolski relies on Henry Remak's definition of comparative literature as an interdisciplinary endeavour tied to other spheres of culture such as philosophy, history, religion, social sciences or the arts (49) in order to highlight the importance of comparativism as a method for cultural analysis.

The second part of the volume brings together articles by writers such as Dorota Kolodziejczyk, Dariusz Skorzewski or Magdalena Koch. In her article entitled “Comparative Literature and Postcolonial Studies – A New Opening for Comparativism”, Kolodziejczyk states that there are close links between comparative literature and postcolonial studies. Grounded in post-colonial studies, comparativism will not look for evidences of complete rejection of colonial subjection, but rather for the ambivalent and ambiguous heritage of colonialism. Postcolonial studies enforce on comparative literature new methods of reading texts, in order to include, for instance, the otherness of minorities (82-83). Last but not least, one of the important points Kolodziejczyk makes is that “postcolonialism symptomatically tends to include comparative literature within its field of interest” (85).

Skorzewski's and Koch's articles have a common denominator: the discussion about East-West polarities. For instance, Skorzewski warns that the Orientalizing clichés of the Enlightenment continue to proliferate (107), while Koch mentions academics of Balkan origin (such as Maria Todorova or Vesna Goldsworthy) who try to recover “the

proper voice” of Balkan discourse and, at the same time, defend the identities of colonized nations (130).

The issue of 'the province' is tackled by Emilia Kledzik in her article “The Question of the Province in Polish and East German Literature and Literary Studies After 1989”, as the author conducts a thorough analysis of the concept in opposition to urban space. This dichotomy is presented as being an essential polarity of post-colonial theory. As a cultural topos, 'the province' is recognized as a source of national identity construction in post-1989 Polish and German literatures, tackled in a comprehensive and impressive comparative study. In the above mentioned historical and aesthetic context, “the phenomena of the province additionally coincides with the decline of the communist-era centralization and with the recognition of cultural diversity in what was previously supposed to remain a monolith” (137), allowing for a discussion about the notion of the Other and its implied stereotypical description. Seen through a post-modern lens, the province is also considered to be a device by means of which a deconstruction of collective identities, as well as a so-called smashing of national narratives and myths can be achieved.

In “The Ukrainian Production Novel as a Product of Socialist Realist Mass Culture. A Postmodern Perspective”, Agnieszka Matusiak's argument is rooted in the conviction that Ukrainian socialist realism and more particularly, the production novel, as its most representative aesthetic form, has been neglected by researchers despite the avid necessity to conduct further research in this respect in order to gain a better understanding of Ukrainian cultural identity. The ensuing proposition is to focus on the traumatic socialist realist canon so as to achieve decolonization by means of “a re-evaluation of myths, symbols, stereotypes and ideology that regard the communist empire, but also those that regard their own [Ukrainian] nation” (155). The author's ambitious and well-structured plan includes an emphasis on language as a means of propaganda, on 1930s Eastern versus Western mass culture and on the notion of kitsch - including “the socialist realist kitschman” (161) - as allies of totalitarian systems. Her methodological framework is based on postcolonialism, postmodernism, Marxism and structuralism, providing a much welcome theoretical pluralism.

The most diversified section of this volume, the last part, brings together critics whose focus is on oral history projects, the question of cinema history writing, Central Europe as an artistic category, the issue of the canon, as well as architecture and intertextuality. In the article entitled “What Sort of History Does Central and Eastern Europe Need? The Chances of Oral History”, Michal Kierzkowski reflects on the sensitive issues of education and oral history projects, helping pupils to better understand the communist past. In the author's own words, “spoken history is well-suited as a means of adding new quality to historical education” (177).

In an article about Central and Eastern European cinema, editor Dobrochna Dabert rhetorically asks “Is it Worth Writing the History of Cinema in Central and Eastern Europe?”. Her answer seems to be affirmative. Consequently, a good history of the cinema in this geographical area should respect national differences, highlight its European origin, but also bring to the forefront its unique characteristics (188).

Discussing the artistic traits of Central Europe, Urszula Gorska focuses on the antitheses between Western universalism and Eastern parochialism (204), the opposition between France as the center of rationalism and libertinism and Central Europe as

dominated by religious metaphysics and irrationalism (205). She also characterizes Central European mentality as the incessant drive for freedom (202).

Bakula's second article in this volume focuses on the issue of the canon and how this notion is challenged by both anti-canon and post-canon. According to Foucault and Cunningham, the canon is ideologically-based. For this reason, there are authors, such as the Russian writer Victor Erofeev, who prefer to take an anti-canonical stance: "the anticanonicity of his texts, owing to his great popularity among his readership has not weakened, and proves the importance of this strategy in transforming Russian culture" (242). For instance, Erofeev's *The Encyclopedia of the Russian Soul* (1999) was published in many editions in both Russia and other countries. As mentioned at the beginning of this review, "the post-canon is not created for or against tradition but alongside it" (246). Furthermore, "the canons are the most solipsistic part of national culture. They usually develop in opposition to other canons (247).

Overall, *Comparisons and Contexts. Essays on Central-Eastern European Literature and Culture* is a welcome addition to Central and Eastern Studies as well as to Post-Colonial Studies in general, both due to the rich theoretical discussions and to the case studies concerning this ethnically, politically and culturally diverse geographical area that struggles to cope with the communist past and with the clichés of Eastern parochialism.

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