Introduction

America to Poland: Cultural Transfers and Adaptations

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- 1 The papers included in this special issue of *EJAS* address the complexity of the presence of American culture in contemporary Poland, of its various forms, appearances, and manifestations in broadly understood cultural texts. The history of this presence seems to be also a complex one. Between 1945 and 1989, Poland found itself on the receiving end of flows arriving from the East (the Sovietization of Poland) and the West, with the Western (both West European and American) influences kept at a minimum by the political authorities, ineffective as that control eventually turned out to be. After the systemic change in 1989, Poland was open to currents coming mainly from the West, but also, in a broader sense, became integrated with the global capitalist economy. It can thus be said that after 1989 Poland experienced simultaneously a number of processes, including the systemic change from socialism to capitalism, democratization, globalization, Westernization, Europeanization, and, as some argued, Americanization.
- 2 One would be ill-advised to perceive the American cultural influences mainly and simply in terms of “Americanism” or “Americanization” which (especially the latter one) are usually invested with negative meaning. The word “Americanization,” as pointed out by Rob Kroes, is often “unduly alarmist,” as it “reduces the complex processes of cultural influence, of borrowing, imitation, and reception, to the stark binary form of a zero-sum game,” where “any degree of Americanization will... imply an equal degree of de-Europeanization” (xi).
- 3 As convincingly argued by such theorists as John Tomlinson and the already quoted Rob Kroes, the “cultural imperialism” thesis, implying docility and the “colonized” mass audience’s passive acceptance of the delivered content for one’s own, shows its inadequacy in the face of what actually happens ‘on the ground’. Following Rob Kroes one might use the metaphor of the receiving culture as a beachcomber, picking up the cultural “flotsam and jetsam” brought to the shore by the ocean waves to make a bricolage of the cultural material at its disposal rather than that of a beleaguered bastion of its own purity (Kroes 162-178). Such, in the words of Winfried Fluck, is the

drift of much of the recent scholarship on the cultural transfer from America to Europe: “The recognition that cultural material is never simply absorbed as a model of behavior but is re-appropriated in different contexts for different needs and purposes is... the bottom-line consensus at which the Americanization debate has arrived” (21-22). Fluck considers the fear of “losing control of one’s culture” embedded in the allergic response to “Americanization” as being misplaced and “obsolete,” as it [the fear] “clings to an outdated notion of national self-control or even nationhood,” like in the case of analogous German fears of “Germanness” becoming “diluted” or “polluted.” What makes such fears “hopelessly” obsolete, argues Fluck, is that they are expressed at the time when “the ownership of media and other cultural resources can no longer be neatly distinguished” (29).

- 4 What we would like to visualize in this volume is the cultural flow taking place from America to Europe, and to Poland in particular, not so much as a “threat” to the “Europeanness” or “Polishness” of the receiving culture, but as part of a complex dynamics of cultural exchanges, borrowings and adaptations arising from cross-border and cross-cultural contacts whose volume and speed have dramatically increased, owing to the deployment of new, or vastly improved, means of communication but also to the lifting of the rigors imposed by the political regimes.
- 5 What should be kept in mind is that the flows from America to Poland were frequently indirect. Having skipped the “opportunity” to be Americanized during the Cold War, much of Eastern Europe after 1989 became open to what sometimes took the form of Americanization by proxy. Most importantly perhaps, the models of consumer capitalism which had arrived in Western Europe directly from the United States after the Second World War, were now being exported to Poland mainly through European, and not American, channels. Eastern Europe’s conversion to capitalist economy and consumer culture was spearheaded by West European businesses and brands, with the Polish consumers seduced not by American but by French, German, Dutch, Danish and Portuguese shopping malls, supermarkets and chain stores, all of them “American” as the culture of mass consumption might have been to the Western Europeans in the postwar decades. This, of course, does not amount to saying that America’s “soft power” has not affected the Polish culture and the Polish imaginary—far from it, but talking about it one should have a sense of proportions keeping in mind that “Americanization” in Poland never led to such outbursts of self-defense as could be heard in Latin America or among some of the Western European intellectuals.
- 6 What will, we hope, transpire from the contributions to this volume is that the American cultural influences—call them cultural transfers from the United States—took various forms and were mediated by a number of factors: political (primarily between 1945 and 1989, when the cultural flow from across the Atlantic was being interfered with by the Communist authorities), economic (one thinks especially of the Americanization of the Polish media industry and film distribution) and ideological (like the often manifested mythic belief in the closeness of “American” and “Polish” values).

Fluck, Winfried. “The Americanization of German Culture? The Strange, Paradoxical Ways of Modernity.” *German Pop Culture. How “American” Is It?* Ed. Agnes C. Mueller. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2004. 19-39. Print.

Kroes, Rob. *If You’ve Seen One, You’ve Seen the Mall: Europeans and American Mass Culture*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996. Print.

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