

Challenges regarding  
Gender Studies discourse in  
West-East exchanges  
(The case of Poland)

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# Edward Said's quotation:

“Like people and schools of criticism, ideas and theories travel – from person to person, from situation to situation, from one period to another. [...] The movement of ideas and theories from one place to another is both a fact of life and a usefully enabling condition of intellectual activity. [...] **Such movement into a new environment [...] necessarily involves processes of representation and institutionalisation different from those at the point of origin.** This complicates any account of the transplantation, transference, circulation, and commerce of theories and ideas.”

*The World, the Text, and the Critic*, 1983, p. 226

# Two Simplified Methodological Approaches

- Interdisciplinary model of ‘foreign’ origin utilises ‘western-born’ discourses
- Philological model tends to be ethnocentric and normative. It also privileges the ‘local’ over the ‘foreign’

# Selected discourses of the interdisciplinary model include:

- postcolonial studies
- identity studies
- gender studies
- performance studies
- cultural studies
- eco-criticism
- narrative strategies (Lyotard's grand narrative)

# Gender Studies

- grew out of feminist discourse and is now developing in a parallel way to feminist criticism
- GENDER tends to be understood as a social and cultural construction of *femininity* and *masculinity* and it should not be confused with the biological category of sex for which the terms *femaleness* and *maleness* are usually reserved

Q: Is Gender Studies a case of **illuminating approach** or a **colonising discourse**?

# Gender

- The term itself (not the concept) originated in English language scholarship in c. 1968
- Its application in Polish and Poland dates back to the early 1990s

GENDER – rodzaj, kulturowa tożsamość płci, płeć kulturowa, **dżender**

# Challenges and traps:

Poland as a country does not always fit the widely spread paradigm of the Western discourse which divides the spheres of activity into **‘private’** and **‘public’**

In Poland public places were often marked ‘foreign’ and the ‘public’ activities took place in private zones (underground, clandestine movements are a big part of Poland’s history)

Shana Penn, *Solidarity’s Secret. The Women who Defeated Communism in Poland* (2005)

# More traps

- The empowering ‘Western’ concept of female genealogy (esp. Cixous and Irigaray) can appear enslaving in the Polish context due to
- **The Polish Mother** (Matka-Polka) construct in which womanhood equals motherhood



## Scholarly myths:

- ‘Western’ concepts regarding gender did not reach Poland before 1989

-*The Second Sex* tr. 1972

-The Polish seminars at the University of Gdansk led by Professor Maria Janion (1980s) led to the publication of 3 volumes in the series *Transgresje*

# Who are the scholars of Gender Studies today?

- Insiders (Polish native speakers living in Poland)
- Outsiders (English native speakers living outside of Poland)

in-betweeners:

- 'insider-outsiders'
- 'outsider-insiders'

# Susan Stanford's quotation:

“Racism, ethnocentrism, homophobia, and class bias remained pervasive in the sex/gender feminist discourse of the 1970s - whether intentional, unconscious, insensitive, ignorant, patronizing, or well meaning. What began as scattered challenges intensified into often angry and organized confrontations in which women of color, lesbian women, Jewish women, Third World women, and working class women demanded attention to differences among women as a top priority for feminism.” (71)

- *Mappings: Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of Encounter, 1998*

# Brief concluding points:

- Applying ‘Western-born’ theory to the region of CEE should not be a one-way street
- Literary/social/cultural and theoretical texts talk to each other and can enrich each other
- Establishing your own methodology should be a process of mutual exchange in which all ‘texts’ are granted an equal status
- A borrowed theory does not have to become a dogma as Edward Said has warned us
- Resist the totalising myths on both sides

Thank you for your attention



# Two basic approaches within gender studies

- **CONSTRUCTIONIST** approach to gender is concerned with the production and organisation of cultural and social roles, which are historically determined and ascribed to a particular sex. It assumes that society moulds and shapes our perception.
- **ESSENTIALIST** approach to gender holds that the natural is repressed by the social and consequently maintains that women (and men) are born not made. It assumes that biology determines our perception while society modifies it.

# ‘Images of Women Criticism’ is not part of Gender Studies

- It was a normative approach to literature which advocated the depiction of positive female role-models in literary texts
- Polish critics and scholars applied a slightly modified version of this approach in their studies published in the 1990s.

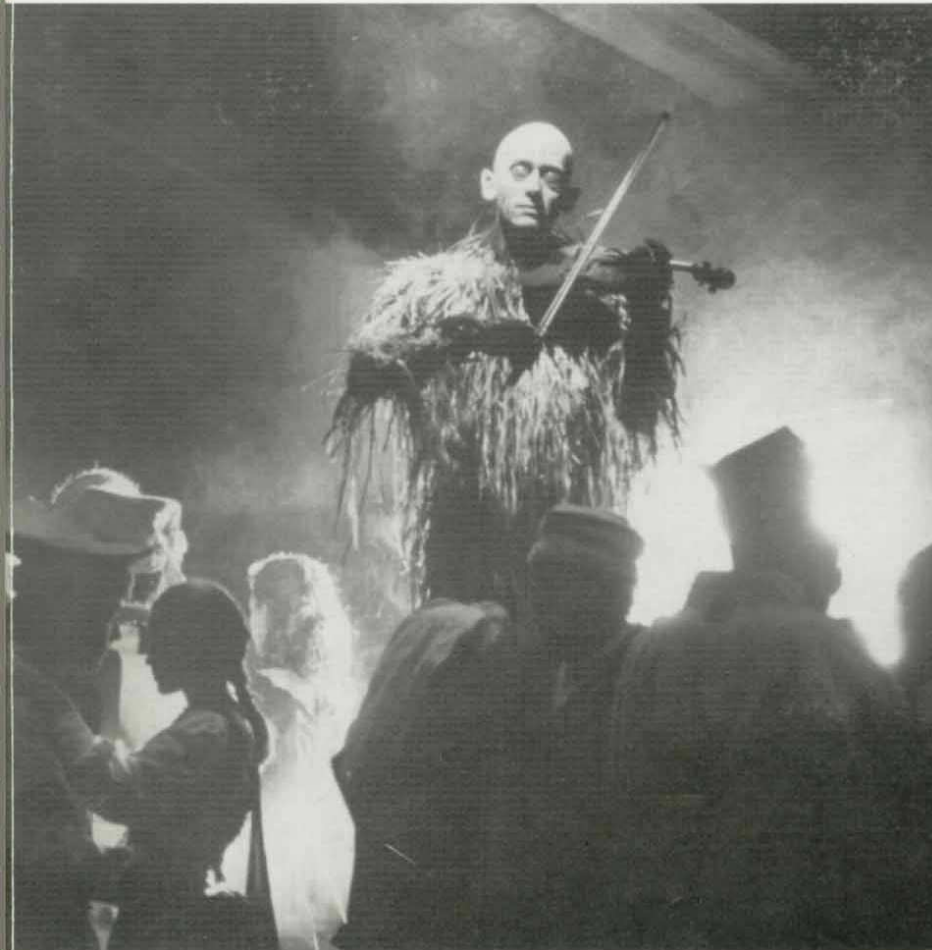


# Cultural Studies

- seeks to detect the mechanisms of how particular cultural phenomena (including both ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture) function within a specific geographic , cultural region
- studies the role of public, mainstream culture in shaping national collective consciousness, fantasy, or, in short, cultural mythology of a particular nation

# theatre journal

MAY 2002



# James Clifford's quotation:

“Every focus excludes; there is no politically innocent methodology for intercultural interpretation. One needs to focus on hybrid, cosmopolitan experiences as much as on rooted, native ones. (...) The goal is not to replace the cultural figure ‘native’ with the intercultural figure ‘traveler.’ Rather the task is to focus on concrete mediations of the two, in specific cases of historical tension and relationship.”

- *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, 1997