

(Un)accidental Tourists: Polish Literature and Visual Culture in South Africa in the 20th and 21st Centuries

Jagiellonian University in Krakow – summary for general public

The goal of the project is to investigate the reception of 20th- and 21st-century Polish literature and visual culture in South Africa and to recognize the endurance and longevity of transnational and transgenerational Central European memory in South Africa's literary and cultural universe. It also wishes to demonstrate the fundamental role played by Polish literature and visual arts in the development of South African literary and artistic production in the 20th and 21st centuries. In order to reveal and establish the paradigmatic function of Polish literature and culture with regard to South African literary and cultural production, the project intends to analyse the works of thirteen major South African writers and visual artists (J.M. Coetzee, Athol Fugard, Nadine Gordimer, Dan Jacobson, William Kentridge, Deborah Levy, among others) as well as their real and symbolic bonds with over a dozen Polish writers and visual/performance artists (the likes of Zbigniew Herbert, Zofia Kalińska, Tadeusz Kantor, Czesław Miłosz, Olga Tokarczuk) and a number of other Central European artists (e.g. Elias Canetti, Milan Kundera, Joseph Roth). The project argues that placing prime focus on Poland and Central Europe is far from been “accidental” and that Polish history, experience, and literary/art works are of fundamental importance not only to the individual oeuvres and artistic visions of a number of South African writers and artists but also to the birth and evolution of South African literature and culture in the discussed period. Simultaneously, the project will scrutinise and reconstitute the trajectory of the reception of 20th- and 21st-century Polish literature and visual culture in South Africa, including its origins, scope, and existing acquisition models. Additionally, it will address the meaning and functions of the creative “dialogue” carried out by both Polish and South African writers and artists over the last decades, as well as the role of English-language South African culture in the process of re-positioning Polish culture (i.e. the latter entering the so-called “trans-Atlantic canon”). The research material will comprise the complete corpora of selected South African writers' and artists' works, historical sources, as well as papers held in the archives and specialist collections in the Republic of South Africa, the United Kingdom, and the United States (many of them previously unpublished and never researched). The project outcomes will provoke the need to re-consider and re-interpret the South African literary and cultural canon, as well as critically re-examine the role of Polish and Central European cultural heritage in its production.

The project “(Un)accidental Tourists: Polish Literature and Visual Culture in South Africa in the 20th and 21st Centuries”, carried out by a research team composed of 5 notable scholars from a variety of academic disciplines (literature studies, culture studies, history, art history), is the first attempt to scrutinise mutual dependencies between Polish/Central European and South African cultural heritage in international research.