

Colonial Complex.

Visual Culture and "Colonialism without Colonies" in the Interwar Period in Poland

The objective of the research project, envisioned as a four-year-long effort, is to retrace and interpret the visual culture of the “colonial complex” that emerged in the Polish public sphere in the interwar period, especially in the 1930s, when it reached peak intensity. Poland’s colonial ambitions arguably emerged in the wake of the country’s Wedding to the Sea on February 10, 1920. This figurative and actual opening of the country to the sea underpinned and drove visions of distant, exotic overseas territories, with their estates and riches, that Poland presumably needed and deserved.

The main field of study of the project is the visual sphere of the interwar period—illustrated periodicals (their covers, photo-essays, graphics), cinema and its genres, traditional and new modes of visual commercials (i.a. outdoor advertisement), caricature, and visual art. Visual culture forms an understudied field of Polish colonial imagination when compared with the analysis of literature (including popular genres and press) or political history. Meanwhile visual representations played crucial role in creation of ideas of distant territories, their inhabitants, as well as shaping ways of racialized seeing and identifying racial difference.

The dominant ways of engaging with the interwar ideas of Polish overseas colonies have for long sought to either dismiss the notion of colonial expansion as “pure fantasy” or affirm it as “no mere fantasy” but a feasible political plan. Instead, this project seeks to interrogate precisely these “colonial fantasies”, examining them as stories, narrative and visual frameworks, manifestations of ideas and desires (conscious and subconscious) related to the conquest and seizure of foreign lands and the subjugation of their peoples, both male and female.

The project will interrogate not only the explicitly expressed colonialist plans and demands, but also the more indirect, everyday participation in reproducing “hegemonic Western discourses”, manifested in this case in the form of visual clichés building exoticizing stereotypes; in film narratives of conquest and subjugation (also sexual) of the indigenous peoples of faraway lands, etc. The mainstay tropes of colonialism and imperialism, along with their attendant racism, are clearly apparent in the photo essays portraying the coasts of Africa (on the covers of ‘Morze’ magazine, for example) as virgin lands waiting to be populated; in the country’s love affair with the sea and romance-at-sea storylines in film; in the announcement of a boxing match that would pit a white athlete against a black fighter, embodying raw and unbridled strength; in the exotic romance flick, in which the white protagonist, a Polish seaman, traveled overseas to return with treasure and an attractive woman at his side (who would then serenade him with *Dla ciebie chcę być biała* [For You, I Want to Be White], launching the song to fame); in the tropes of “cleaning,” “bathing,” and “whitening” Black people that were rampant in popular culture (but also in the ambiguous degrading class figure of “white Negro” –“biały Murzyn”), etc. The research team will also seek to isolate artistic and popular strategies of subverting and disrupting the colonial ideas and desires.

Measurable effects of the project will include an original monograph compiled by the PI, as well as three research articles that will be submitted for publication in high-impact journals within the field. I will also submit at least one article for publication in leading Polish-language journals and present my findings during at least two international conferences.