

Re-Reading the Text of Space

German-Polish Borderlands in Late-Twentieth-Century Polish Prose



ERTEGUN
GRADUATE
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My approach

Close textual analysis

Small corpus of four prose narratives (1987–2000)

Works by
Paweł Huelle,
Stefan Chwin,
Olga Tokarczuk,
and Artur D.
Liskowacki

Focus on representations of changing spatial identities

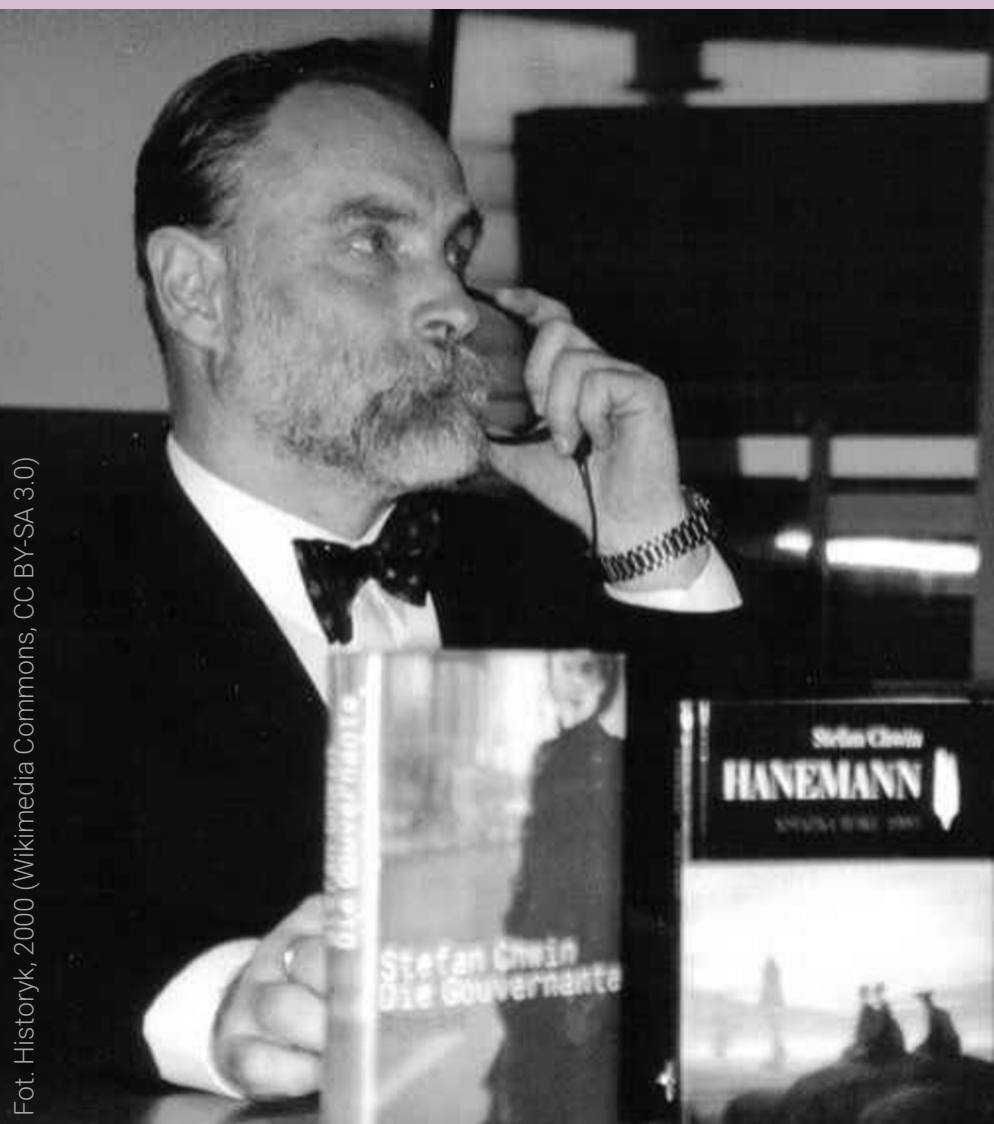
Interest in storytelling as a mode of engaging with the past

Context

Following the Second World War, Central and Eastern Europe underwent radical ethnic reconfiguration. The Soviet Union annexed large parts of eastern Poland, while Germany lost territories including Silesia, Pomerania and East Prussia to Poland. Unprecedented population movements followed, and many settlements located in the lands ceded from Germany to Poland saw a near-complete population turnover. Polish communist authorities downplayed the German past of the transferred territories and insisted on their inherent Polishness. This repressed German heritage resurfaced with the fall of the regime, becoming the subject of new Polish prose that 'reads' and 'retells' the text of space.



Marking the new German-Polish border in 1945 (public domain image, Wikimedia Commons)



Fot. Historyk, 2000 (Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 3.0)

'Hanemann' (1995) by Stefan Chwin

The novel captures the transformation of predominantly German-speaking Danzig into Polish Gdańsk, focusing on the turbulent years from the late 1930s to the early 1950s. The narrator, born to Polish parents in the coastal city in 1945, tries to retrospectively piece together the life of his childhood neighbour, Hanemann. The man – a German doctor – does not flee westwards with his compatriots as the Soviets approach, and finds himself adrift in the changed social and political landscape. The narrative juxtaposes German and Polish perspectives on the city, re-reading the same neighbourhood through the eyes of its pre- and post-war communities. The abandoned domestic spaces pass into Polish hands and, as family life carries on, acquire new meanings. Hanemann's city at once endures and exists no more: the German Danzig met its end, but human activity in its changing cultural and material manifestations continues in the Polish Gdańsk. New stories overwrite the old ones.

'Dom dzienny, dom nocny' (1998) by Olga Tokarczuk

The narrative has no obvious beginning or end: it is a collection of intersecting stories that depict the Kłodzko region in today's southwestern Poland, a crossroads of Silesian, Prussian, Czech, Austro-Hungarian and Polish influences. The same locations are rendered from multiple character viewpoints, in a variety of stylistic conventions, and across several temporalities, producing layered depictions of space. Since the narrative does not progress in a linear fashion, there is no sense of a gradual transition that would culminate in the region assuming Polish identity. Rather, the spatial constellations of which the area forms part appear to be subject to constant reconfiguration. The area's cultural identity emerges as being as in flux – possible to construct anew – rather than enduring. Paradoxically, the overlapping of perspectives in 'Dom dzienny, dom nocny' both reflects the area's borderland status, marked by a multiplicity of identities, and challenges this very peripherality. The text reinscribes the space within a broader, universal framework and a rich cultural tradition.



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