

A HUNGER FOR HABITS

Prof. Andreas Böhn, a fellow of the Polish Institute of Advanced Studies (PIASt), explains why we love Polaroids and wonders if our refrigerators will be soon buying milk for us.

ACADEMIA: We feel somehow moved when we see an old video cassette player. Is that what you describe as “media nostalgia,” a key concept in your research?

ANDREAS BÖHN: Yes, that’s a good example. We can discern two types of media nostalgia. One can be found directly in the media, for example movies that try to depict a certain era. The other is defined more deeply. Media nostalgia is nostalgia for the media themselves, for former stages of their development, for example nostalgia for analog films, old videos, and the specific characteristics of these types of media. In analog films, you had those typical deteriorations and scratches, and the colors were different. Some present-day artists try to simulate these effects, using analog or digital technologies. They make their works look old. In my opinion, you also have this media nostalgia on the level of everyday life. Some people are attached to Polaroid photos, because they remind them of their childhood, they associate them with family. Not everyone can find these values in new technologies. There’s also a reflection of this phenomenon in actual media production, often through the reconstruction or simulation of the specific features of the appearance of these media.

If I understand you correctly, there are two reflections of media nostalgia – one is purely technical and pertains directly to means of communication and technology, whereas the other is more linked to fashion, to a yearning for past eras.

I’d rather say it’s about fascination with technology itself. I think about people who collect old photo cameras or vintage cars. The other explanation pertains to media production, the simulation of what movies from the 1970s and 1980s looked like.

What are the reasons for these types of nostalgia?

The reality is changing so rapidly that new generations will live in a completely different world. We get used to the fact that during our life span things change completely, so we must constantly adapt to these new technologies. A lot of people do that, but in their memory, former stages of their lives remain connected

to these specific features of the appearance of media. That has a certain value in itself. It is not true that some of them can't keep up with the requirements of the modern era. They may keep up with the latest developments, have the latest smartphones, but they may have certain emotional attitudes to older technologies and media products. This is visible in the field of technology, where the lifespan of innovations is rather short, and in computer games, where you have simulations of older computer games. That's like a window through which we can see the past.

I have the impression that over the past several years, there has been this general trend to slow down, which is visible in various spheres of life. When it comes to ecology, for example, people want to consume less, live more locally. Does this mean that we can talk of a general trend caused by the fact that people are tired with this constant race?

Yes, there's a tendency to regain, re-cultivate specific sensitivities, find value in experiencing things. Many people feel that as life speeds up, they lose the opportunity to enjoy various experiences in the moment. You eat fast, because you don't have much time during your workday. There has to be some sort of a counterweight to that. From time to time, I want to eat slowly and focus only on this. If I go on a journey, I want to eat something special, made locally, I want to take my time and enjoy the taste. People want to have a relationship with things, their places of birth. They want to find out what has been going on there, what happened before. We put things in museums, because they are not permanent, they disappear. Everything around us will disappear in 20 years. That frightens people.

You're staying in Warsaw on a temporary basis. Have you managed to get to know the city?

It's my fourth time in Warsaw, but my previous visits were only for a few days. I visited Warsaw for the first time in 2010. Even during my first visit, I found Warsaw particularly interesting as a person who studies memory and recollections. It was destroyed to such a large extent that very few things remained intact. Streets are like museums: some buildings have been renovated, others were irrevocably destroyed, still others exist only in fragments. I think a lot about that, especially as a German.

How do you like living here?

Very much. The city is very lively, international. It's evident that it's changing. My apartment is next to the Hala Mirowska. If I go for a walk in the direction of the Central Station, I can see a cross-section of society, people who represent different professions. The worlds are intermingled. If I go towards the Hilton Hotel and Grzybowska Street, I can see a mixture of older buildings and newer high-rise buildings, cheap restaurants for workers and elegant restaurants for business people.

When working on your project at PIASt, you also intended to collaborate with Polish researchers.

I earlier managed to get in contact with some people in Poland from different fields such as German studies and media studies. I'm hoping for some interesting collaboration with German



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is a literary researcher.

He has authored books and several dozen articles devoted to intertextuality, mimesis, fictionality, and metafiction in literature, film, and other arts.

studies researchers in Bydgoszcz. I also met people from theater and performance studies in Kraków. But these contacts are not strictly linked to my current research interests.

You intended to compare Germany, China, and Poland in terms of Industry 4.0.

I'd like to include Poland in this comparison. Here, the discussion related to my topic of research is going in a slightly different direction. There's a lot of hype around Industry 4.0 in Germany, you can read newspaper articles devoted to this topic every other day. Everyone is debating where technologies are leading us, how that is related to the job market, and what technological competencies we have compared to the Koreans and the Japanese. In other words, we look at the German economy in a broader context. In Poland, there's a more dystopian view – will there be any jobs for people, or will all the work be done by robots?

What does the term Industry 4.0 mean exactly?

This term is specific for the discussions currently being held in Germany. It was coined by the economists linked to the Hanover Fair, one of the world's largest industrial fairs. The intention was to sum up international discussions about technology and put emphasis on industrial production. How has it changed since we got smartphones, the Internet, and social media? Will there be factories without workers in which one machine will control the work of other machines during production and in warehouses, and cars without drivers that will be delivering the goods produced in this way? It's about how the whole of the technological infrastructure is changing. We already have devices that we can instruct to draw the curtains, if there's too much sun coming in. There are houses that ask you if they should turn on the TV, because your favorite series is on. There are refrigerators that tell you that you've run out of milk and ask if they should order some.

On the other hand, people have the need to do certain things alone. When the first cake mix was launched in the 1950s, housewives wouldn't buy it, because they felt they were not putting in enough effort. So the producer removed the egg ingredient, and sales went up, because it was at least necessary to add that one ingredient. What about technology?

Let's take cars, for example. Today, they're an integral part of our lives, they interact very strongly with our bodies. In order for cars to work, we must make specific moves. We act very automatically when we are in a car, there's a lot of routine, and it would be very difficult for us to change this routine. So that's why cars still work in the same way on the outside, although there are already some very modern elements under the hood. But we could be driving them very differently.

The same holds true for sounds made by the engine or the steering wheel – the car must sound familiar.

Does this mean that technology must not only be innovative but also satisfy the needs imposed by human habits?

Yes. There's an entire branch of interface technology. It needs to reflect our needs and comfort, not the technology inside machines.

During your stay in Poland, are you analyzing such examples?

For the past five years, I was the dean of my faculty, so I was outside of research. That's why I want not only to continue my previous research but also work on something new. I'm using the time here in Poland to think about this topic, I'm testing different directions that are worth analyzing, I'm reviewing the literature. Certainly, what I can do is look at media production, the general media discourse, and see how these discussions are reflected in production. I studied that earlier at the example of works of literature and movies. It's always worth going back and analyzing the sources of how things are presented. I don't know yet if that will result in a book or a different project.

Do you have enough resources here in Poland?

I chiefly make use of online sources. Essentially, I could implement this project anywhere, but I wanted to do so here. I was curious about the discussions on this subject in Poland. I compare Poland and Germany as two countries with very strong industrial traditions based on coal and steel. The UK, the most important country from the perspective of early industrialization, has lost these traditions. Its economy is now currently different. Poland and Germany have a lot in common, but, as I said, I have not met any researchers interested in this topic in my discipline.

There must be a reason why this is the case.

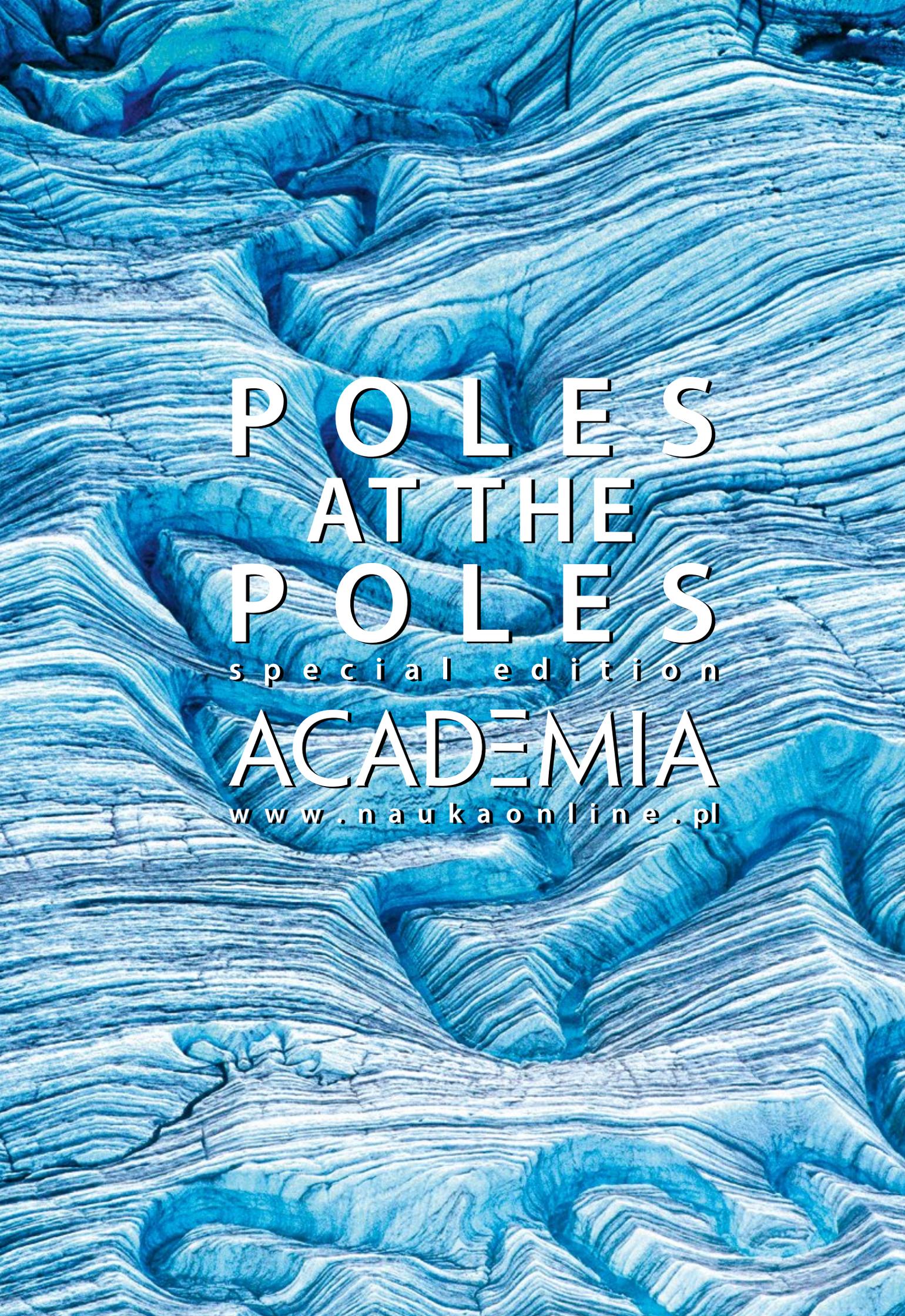
Unfortunately, I have yet to find it.

I'm surprised, because we have a rich tradition of research into intertextuality in Poland, and that's the point of departure for your research. Maybe it is the technological context that makes the matter difficult and narrows down the group of experts.

Maybe. In Germany, the situation is similar, most literary researchers are not interested in studying technologies. There are separate branches of philosophy devoted to this issue, the ethics of technology, and so on. There is a certain tradition of technology in sociology, too, but not so much in literary studies.

INTERVIEW BY JUSTYNA ORŁOWSKA

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