

READINGS OF THE PAST

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Linguistic inspirations left an indelible mark on the 20th century humanities. In his *Course in General Linguistic*, Ferdinand de Saussure formulated two fundamental theses, which proved to be prophetic for the future thinking about culture. He first assumed, that language creates a complete, autonomous system of meanings; and second that it is not an instrument of conveying sense, but rather that sense is a function of language. In the second half of the 20th century, these theses became an important reference point for numerous theories shaping many humanistic disciplines to this very day. Perceiving the world of culture as a system of meanings generated on the basis of certain semiotic principles and discovering the creative essence of language in culture – this is the lasting contribution of the beliefs and observations of the first creators of the study of signs.

These ideas also influenced the linguistics-inspired research strategies developed in historiography and cultural anthropology, as evidenced by the texts collected in this volume of *Anthropology of History Yearbook*. An important achievement of anthropologising historiography of the 1980^s (available in Polish for the first time), the discussion between Roger Chartier, Dominick LaCapra, James Fernandez and Robert Darnton about the principles and tools of interpretation used in Darnton's famous book *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (1984) provided the core and pretext for many of the articles included in this volume.¹ The publication of the Polish translation of this classic work on historical anthropology is a good opportunity to recall

¹ The editorial staff would like to thank Roger Chartier, Robert Darnton, Dominick LaCapra and James Fernandez for granting their permission to publish Polish translations of their articles in *Anthropology of History Yearbook*. We would like to emphasise, following the suggestion of the authors, that the texts published below should be treated as opinions and research standpoints shared by their authors at the time they were originally published.

the debate.² The three decades which have passed since Darnton's book first came out, together with the different intellectual contexts of contemporary humanities, create a new framework for the reception of *The Great Cat Massacre*. The Polish edition of the book and the accompanying discussion also present an opportunity to confront the ideas coming from different, internally heterogeneous, research communities. In this volume of *Anthropology of History Yearbook*, we take advantage of this opportunity in two ways. Firstly, by adding the voices of Polish authors to the old debate in the spirit of a "look from afar;" secondly, by confronting two strategies of settling the essential dilemma of historiography, which is also reflected in the debate in question: how to interpret historical texts and what is their reference to social facts and to the world of a bygone culture.

Robert Darnton, applying Geertz's technique of "thick description," attempted to probe the cultural reality of various social groups in 18th-century France. Through a broad painting of the semiotic panorama of the *langue* of culture at the time, he tried to penetrate the possible (at the time) ways of reading the world, always reduced to the concrete of the *parole*, which are foreign to present-day Western culture. Darnton wanted to expose the uniqueness of the past reading, appearing in front of the historian's eyes in the cracks of the textual expression of a past cultural experience, each time ascribed to a specific historical community. Roger Chartier, polemicising with the American historian, provocatively emphasised, referring to the famous essay of Clifford Geertz, that "[...] the massacre of the cats is not the cockfight; in relating it and interpreting it, the historian is dependent on a report that has already been made of it and a text that is already in existence, invested with its own specific ends. This text exhibits the event, but it also constitutes the event as the result of the act of writing."³

At the time when Chartier was formulating his doubts, Jacek Banaszekiewicz was already following a similar road; in true Derridean style, he saw that in their research practice, historians face only real texts, i.e. language constructs, whose referentiality to the outside world is problematic at best.⁴ He argued that

² R. Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History*, New York 1984; Polish edition: R. Darnton, *Wielka masakra kotów i inne epizody francuskiej historii kulturowej*, transl. D. Guzowska, Warszawa 2012. We would like to thank Michał Zgutka of Polish Scientific Publishers PWN for giving us access to the Polish translation of Robert Darnton's book before it came out.

³ R. Chartier, *Text, Symbols, and Frenchness*, "The Journal of Modern History", 1985, vol. 57, no. 4, p. 685; Cf. id., *Tekst, symbole i francuskość*, "Rocznik Antropologii Historii", 2012, R. II, nr 2 (3), s. 25.

⁴ J. Banaszekiewicz, *Podanie o Piaście i Popielu. Studium porównawcze nad wczesnośredniowiecznymi tradycjami dynastycznymi*, Warszawa 1986.

the reality of a past time, carefully (re)constructed by legions of classical historians, should be replaced with the reality of the text, which is the only reality a researcher can recognise. When Darnton searches for visions and realities of the world enclosed in narrative forms, Banaszekiewicz, claiming that access to what actually happened is impossible, talks about modelling the world presented by narrative schemes and constructs. Darnton examines tales in order to discover real social experiences within the framework of fictitious stories. Banaszekiewicz discovers the internal world of narrative sources and their specific logic, and the textual structures he identifies bear the mark of a long existence, unifying European culture on the most general level. Unlike Darnton, Banaszekiewicz rarely refers tales contained in sources to the extra-textual reality, especially the reality identified within the framework of classical, objective historical research. He tries to remain strictly within the boundaries of the text in his research process, and the semiotic context of a given account is almost solely created by other texts. The meanings of narrative wholes and individual details are identified using the comparative method. It is easy to see that we are dealing with a subtle but significant shift here; Darnton wants to examine the meanings of practices, and Banaszekiewicz studies the meanings behind the textual representations of practices.

Despite this difference, both researchers operate within the framework of the metaphor of reading culture. Respecting the principle of its semiotic nature, they also both understand the key (for the anthropological perspective of research preferred here) fact of man's "being-in-the-world" mediated by status symbols. Both of these strategies of defining the field of historical research, in fact already endorsed in solutions suggested by Ferdinand de Saussure, can be a handy research tool for us.