

Introduction: Revisiting “Messages and values”

In his keynote address titled “The rise and fall of generation *now*,” delivered at the *Futures of Culture: Genealogies, Imaginaries, Actions*, the 4th Congress of the Polish Association of Cultural Studies held as part of the 50th anniversary of the Institute of Cultural Studies at the University of Wrocław, Tim Ingold argued that “the proper meaning of tradition is not to live in the past but to follow those who have gone before you into the future.”¹ Included in this volume, Ingold’s talk searches for a logic of time that differs from the modern, progressive model with its future orientation and disparagement of the past. Ingold insists: “There is an alternative, which is to think differently about time and generations. It is to respect the wisdom of ancestors rather than working tirelessly to refute it.”² In this issue of *Prace Kulturoznawcze*, we revisit the concept of culture proposed by Stanisław Pietraszko, our intellectual “ancestor” and the founder of Poland’s first academic hub of cultural-studies research at the University of Wrocław in 1972.³ Pietraszko spent thirty years developing an original cultural theory of his own. Initially, he regarded culture as “an axiosemiotic sphere” in line with semiotic conceptions, which were widely endorsed at the time. At the turn of the 1980s, he revised his ideas and defined culture as “people’s way of life that is founded on the relation of this life to values.”⁴

Pietraszko died in 2010 and, as a scholar, he finds himself in what Leszek Koczanowicz, a philosopher with ties to Wrocław’s cultural-studies hub, has met-

¹ T. Ingold, “The rise and fall of generation *now*,” *Prace Kulturoznawcze* 26, 2022, no. 4, p. 148.

² *Ibid.*, p. 151.

³ Translating the term *kulturoznawstwo* into English is both challenging and highly problematic, as it has various and divergent genealogies in Poland. To the Wrocław intellectual community, for instance, the tradition of German *Kulturwissenschaft* holds a place of particular significance. Although *kulturoznawstwo* as an academic programme was formally introduced in Wrocław a mere few years after the foundation of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham, the two are entirely distinct entities for reasons both theoretical and geopolitical. Despite that, we decided to translate *kulturoznawstwo* as “cultural studies” with the informed assumption that this is the common practice in Polish academia. More than a few authors published in this volume face similar translatory conundrums, as evidenced in their sometimes elaborate terminological clarifications.

⁴ S. Pietraszko, “Przedmowa,” [in:] S. Pietraszko, *Kultura. Studia teoretyczne i metodologiczne*, Wrocław 2012, p. 13.

aphorically called a “purgatory.” This can be understood not so much as a metaphysical space, but rather, in the ecological spirit, as a network of interrelations and connections. In an interview given on the 40th anniversary of the foundation of cultural studies in Wrocław, Koczanowicz said:

There is no denying that Professor Pietraszko founded a school in all senses of the term. There are students who know the paradigm he developed and want to carry it on, discuss it. [...] A school of thought is always assessed by how productive it is. Interesting, distinguished, productive schools of thought are those that, rather than shutting themselves off in their own communities, attract people from outside, make them eager to come, study, read the writings of their founders, debate with their students, and if the founders are no longer among the living, at least to get in touch with their legend, with people who remember them. [...] Regarding literature, a popular saying has it that, having died, writers are locked in a purgatory, waiting to see how the things brewing around them will end up. The same is true about scholarship; as long as a person lives, writes, lectures, discusses, if they are brilliant—and Professor Pietraszko was brilliant, no doubt about it—they always have an aura around them. When only writings and memory remain, there comes a moment when it turns out how durable the master’s conception in fact is. This moment is coming now. [...] The question is whether, amidst this magma, this stream of various concepts, the first, original cultural studies, or the ‘House of cultural studies’ as they’d put it in the US, will retain its identity and survive storm and stress.⁵

As with any “school of thought,” it is not obvious whether Pietraszko indeed founded one. What would lie at its core? Is there a common language spoken by all the Wrocław-based cultural-studies scholars? Do they share a perspective, a set of thematic concerns, or perhaps a scholarly ethos or a craft, a sensibility, “a tactful way of being” or “an outfit of values,” as Tomasz Majewski has put it?⁶

Enough time has passed since the foundation of cultural studies in Wrocław to assess this. Koczanowicz’s metaphorical “purgatory” can be associated with the insights of Vinciane Despret, whose *Our Grateful Dead: Stories of Those Left Behind* dwells upon the ways of living of the deceased, their agency and activities, which make the ontology of the human world more complicated than it might seem.⁷ Despret writes from an ecological perspective and wonders what places and environments are convenient for encounters with the dead. As alumni/alumnae and members of the Wrocław Institute of Cultural Studies, we have found such a “place” in Pietraszko’s paper “Messages and values,” which has proven seminal for several generations of culture researchers.

This volume can be viewed both as a test and as an experiment. Pietraszko’s “Messages and values” was originally published in Polish in 1992. Given that it was written in Pietraszko’s unique scholarly idiom, to render it in English was

⁵ P.J. Fereński, L. Koczanowicz, “Ten czas teraz właśnie nadchodzi,” [in:] P.J. Fereński, *Kierunek eksperymentalny. Początki pierwszych w Polsce studiów kulturoznawczych*, Wrocław 2012, p. 136.

⁶ T. Majewski, “List z okazji 50-lecia utworzenia kulturoznawstwa jako ‘kierunku eksperymentalnego’ we Wrocławiu,” 13 June 2022 [unpublished].

⁷ V. Despret, *Our Grateful Dead: Stories of Those Left Behind*, transl. P. Muecke, Minneapolis 2021.

a translatory experiment. We are aware that any translation is by default an interpretation. Nonetheless, we believe that meanings are not only lost but also found in translation. Admittedly, Pietraszko defined culture in a variety of ways and never formulated a coherent cultural theory; however, the fundamental premises that underpinned his thought can be gleaned from “Messages and values.” These primarily include the consistent notion of culture as intrinsically related to values, a criticism of semiological and communicological models of culture triggered by their functional focus and the separation of culture as a “relatively autonomous” sphere from other orders of the human world, that is, from civilization and society.

The papers included in the first part of the volume attempt to revisit and reinterpret Pietraszko’s article in the context of the preoccupations of today’s humanities. Aleksandra Kil adopts the perspective of what she calls cultural mediology of the humanities in order to scrutinize Pietraszko’s archives and offer a refined, in-depth reading of “Messages and values” by analysing his collection of index cards. Her examination of the archives makes it possible to retrace considerations on the interrelationship between culture and technology, an issue which is not directly addressed in the text. The index card itself is a captivating example of a message that exceeds the function of a tool of knowledge. Piotr Jakub Fereński’s article is a bold—and at the same time risky—effort to supplement Pietraszko’s framework with Antonio Gramsci’s concept of cultural hegemony. As a matter of fact, Pietraszko rejected Marxist theory, but Fereński explains this by citing the socio-political context of communism in Poland and argues that it is indeed possible to combine the two standpoints in the study of a variety of messages (e.g. murals, graffiti, posters, billboards, monuments, etc.) through which values become manifest in contemporary urban spaces. Analysed by Joanna Sieracka, placards that flooded Polish streets during protests in defence of women’s rights in 2020 in the wake of the tightening of abortion law also represent this kind of message. Sieracka’s paper shows that by inspecting the placards we may look into the values behind them. For its part, the article co-authored by Dorota Koczanowicz and Anna Kwapisz addresses the tension between “uses” and “values,” a relevant issue in Pietraszko’s conception. Koczanowicz and Kwapisz investigate recent projects in critical food design which engage with hot themes, such as social exclusions and climate change, to demonstrate how difficult it is to set apart “the functional” from autotelic values that reside beyond functionality.

These four papers offer a glimpse not only into the current research carried out by the new generation of Wrocław-based scholars but also into the reconfigurations of knowledge caused by intergenerational transfer. It seems that the “exclusive” (or “negative,” to use Dorota Wolska’s term)⁸ nature of nascent cultural studies at Wrocław has given way to an “inclusive” approach that aspires

⁸ D. Wolska, “Kulturoznawstwo jako wiedza humanistyczna. Od kulturoznawstwa negatywnego do niewyraźnego,” [in:] *Antologia tekstów polskiego kulturoznawstwa*, eds. P.J. Fereński, A. Gomółka, K. Moraczewski, Gdańsk 2018, p. 426.

to study various (social, technological and other) heteronomies of culture, rather than exploring its relative autonomy. Given the popularity of relational models in which an array of causal factors are regarded as intertwined, Pietraszko's "pre-precise" distinction into the orders of civilization, society and culture poses a serious challenge to researchers. Another reason behind the transition from the exclusive to the inclusive approach may lie in the complexity of developments (e.g. climate change) we are facing, as well as a fundamental recharting of the epistemological field, where disciplinary boundaries are being obliterated and new research areas are emerging.

The volume also includes a forum on "Messages and values," featuring voices of fellow researchers we invited to participate. Their short texts help look at Pietraszko's seminal article "from afar," that is, from a historical, geographical and/or disciplinary distance afforded by fields of knowledge related to, but different from cultural studies. Alan Liu ponders what would have happened if Pietraszko had studied social media and their governing algorithms. This question accrues relevance amidst the current discussions on artificial intelligence. Ernst van Alphen's semi-autobiographical commentary discovers Pietraszko as a structuralist and speculates whether his interest in values perhaps made him "an affect scholar *avant-la-lettre*." Wojciech Michera, who embraces the stance of a visual culture researcher, believes that Pietraszko's proposal may encourage a more comprehensive study of postcards, including relations between their texts, visual layers and the social contexts in which they are embedded. The volume is capped by Karolina Pawlik's interview with Chinese-born artist Pan Jianfeng, whose work relies on the tradition of Chinese calligraphy to shed an interesting light on the political and spiritual facets of brush-related practices. Jianfeng wonders: "Can we invent writing which is not about information, but purely about free spiritual communication?" The observable timelessness of the brush, the postcard and the letter, all of which may seem redundant today, being too expensive, time-consuming and slow, proves that there is a dimension of culture that cannot be articulated in any other way. We believe that the modern condition is not as pessimistic as its vision in Herman Melville's short story about Bartleby, a junior clerk employed at the Office of Dead Letters for some time.⁹ To paraphrase Melville's celebrated sentence, letters sent on errands of life do not speed to death, but move around in the circuit of culture, which can be construed as a lay variety of eternity in the human world¹⁰ and a sign of the belief that there is a community cemented by something else than communicative acts alone.

⁹ "Dead letters! does it not sound like dead men? Conceive a man by nature and misfortune prone to a pallid hopelessness, can any business seem more fitted to heighten it than that of continually handling these dead letters, and assorting them for the flames." H. Melville, "Bartleby, the scrivener: A story of Wall-Street," *Putnam's Monthly Magazine*, 2 November 1853, pp. 614–615.

¹⁰ Polish poet Edward Stachura regarded letter writing as a poet's fundamental responsibility, which could not be instrumentalized. Letter writing has indeed an ontological dimension to it; E. Stachura, "Rzeka," [in:] E. Stachura, *Wszystko jest poezja*, Warszawa 1975, pp. 274–275.

Michera notes in his commentary that Pietraszko's "intellectual idiom" deserves a separate study of its own. Indeed, Pietraszko's diction is an expression of a rather specific scholarly culture and marks his individual style of thought, which has been and still is a challenge to readers. This is not only a matter of communication (and communicability of what one wants to say about culture). The point is that, in our view, the language of Pietraszko's theoretical texts is not only a "message" but also a "value," that it not only seeks to accurately render the content of his conceptions but also actualizes his characteristic attitude of *via negativa*, a caution that can be described as apophatic.¹¹ Thus, while on the one hand we deal with the excess of language and bold goals set for the theory of culture Pietraszko was developing, on the other we stumble onto his silence, originating from scepticism, among other sources. Systematic negation typical of Pietraszko's style of thought, which is at its most visible in the way he defined culture, is where the hidden comes into view. We believe that the intriguing rhetorical facet of Pietraszko's writings is indispensable for understanding the ontology of the human world, with culture comprised in it. Thus, the very language of his texts stands as testimony to an interesting redundancy and, rather than thwarting communication with our intellectual "ancestor," imbues his conception with an inspiring power and makes it open to interpretations. "Messages and values," as well as Pietraszko's other texts, is like a postcard, with the averse and the obverse closely interconnected. This issue of *Prace Kulturoznawcze* is an experimental response, a "story of those left behind" (Despret), a postcard sent into the past, present and future, to a multitude of addressees with interests in culture, civilization and media.

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Translated by Patrycja Poniatowska

¹¹ "Statements encompassing vast apophatic expanses" are identified in Pietraszko's theoretical texts by Paweł Kuligowski in his "Via negativa. Ku rozdefiniowaniu kultury," [in:] P. Kuligowski, *Przyszłość jest katastrofą. Szkice z filozofii kultury*, Wrocław 2011, p. 98.