




The Dilemmas of a Culturologist

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Abstract

The article concerns the recently published book by Marek Pacukiewicz, *Landscapes of Context*. The author presents the dilemmas of a culturologist – a theoretician and anthropologist of culture struggling with the multifaceted discourse of contemporary humanities. Leading representatives of these sciences, making culture the declared subject of their research, are often content with the presentation of various epistemological strategies aimed at learning about selected aspects of social practices. The practices they analyse, including those of thought, are relatively rarely embedded in broader contexts, and the concept of culture itself is contested as cognitively non-instrumental. Contrary to these tendencies, Pacukiewicz tries to stand up for the metaphysical dimension of culture and proposes to study it as a self-existent being independent of subsequent methodological fashions. He considers *landscape* and *context* to be key concepts for the proposed approach.

Keywords

landscapes, context, culturology, Aristotle, metaphysics, theory of culture

Introduction

Marek Pacukiewicz's considerations, devoted to the titular "landscapes of context," focus on the philosophical, theoretical and cultural consequences of four ways of understanding culture: evaluating and non-evaluating, attributive and distributive. Narrow definitions of culture based on a value-based approach with a philosophical provenance emphasize what is particularly important and worth noting in human legacy. They refer to the idea of "cultivating the mind," which in modern Europe has resulted over time in the identification of culture with religion, science, and art. The broad non-evaluating definitions that have appeared since the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries propose to treat culture as an entirety of human legacy. Therefore, narrow definitions make their subject matter some of the phenomena falling within the scope of broad definitions. The mutually supportive discourse between these areas is, on the one hand, autonomous and self-referential, but on the other hand, it is the key to understanding and describing culture in its broadest sense. This conjunction allows us to ask whether the approaches limiting our understanding of the culture solely to the sphere of phenomena derived from the "cultivation of the mind" do not affect all ways of defining culture.

In the attributive approach, adopted in cultural anthropology and sociology, and having a philosophical basis, culture is an attribute of all human societies since man, as such, has the ability to create it. However, in the tradition of anthropological and cultural research, distributive understanding is most often used – it assumes that there is no society that does not have its own culture. Each of these approaches, developed theoretically, surrounded by a network of terms, glosses, explanations and reservations (among which an important role was played by the gradual annulment of the firm opposition between culture and nature in the field of sociology and cultural anthropology), at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries different concepts of the *cultural landscape* began to be generated, for which the elements of other approaches became a *cognitive context*.

Marek Pacukiewicz (2021) essentially does not ask about the contexts of the cultural landscape but inquiries instead primarily about the landscapes of the context and what constitutes specific landscapes of conditions that allow the perception of *culture as culture*. Pacukiewicz's monograph is a book about context, but reflections on the landscape resonate in it equally intensely. If the book was entitled *Landscapes of Context* it would indicate the cognitive potential of the contexts in which the landscape may be entangled. The reversal of the perspective suggests that it is the contexts of various phenomena, processes, and cultural situations

which form landscapes that allow us to familiarise ourselves and understand multidimensional reality.

The Structure of the Book

The book has a remarkable composition: it opens with *Open Questions* and ends with *Opening Balance*. The opening questions concern two issues: philosophical relations between classical metaphysics, ontology and epistemology, and metaphysical entanglements in the relations between culture, society and man in the contemporary anthropological reflection. The author, among other things, looks at the actor-network theory of Bruno Latour as a concept of experimental, relational metaphysics, as proposed by Krzysztof Abriszewski (Abriszewski, 2012), dependent on the point of view (Latour, 2010; Pacukiewicz, 2021) and analyses the critique of Latour made by Graham Harman (Harman, 2016). He poses questions about the metaphysical motif in Claude Lévi-Strauss's research (Lévi-Strauss, 2000; 2001) and its continuation in the writings of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (Viveiros de Castro, 2014) and Philippe Descola (Descola, 2014). He suggests that in Marshall Sahlins's reflection (Sahlins, 2014), metaphysics "also becomes a mental component that builds individual cultural cosmogonies (...) due to which the Western European idea of metaphysics may appear to us as a common research perspective" (Pacukiewicz, 2021, p. 54). Finally, he attempts to demonstrate how this philosophical and theoretical discourse translates into understanding *culture as culture, in other words, an autonomous being* in the proposals of individual researchers. He groups these theoretical concepts into three parts of the book: *Models, In the Eye of an Anthropologist*, and *Writing the Landscape*. The fourth part, *Representations*, focuses not so much on theoretical discourse as on denoting that the category of landscape, crucial to the monograph, is not only derived from painting practice, but is still an area of mediation between various forms of scientific and artistic discourse.

Discourse

Discourse (as understood by Michel Foucault) is a derivative of a particular stage in the development of Homo sapiens - it requires delaying the instinctive reaction of man to events taking place in the world (Cassirer, 1977), and it enables reflection. The reflection deepens with the introduction of writing, which allows for multiple analyses of the same phrase and sometimes translates into a verbalised lesson of humility, both in the face of the

findings contained in other people's texts and of one's own experiences. However, it may not always be an autotelic reflection: in cultures devoid of writing, the analysis of the spoken word is difficult. Nonetheless, if research is to be trusted (Ong, 1992), the word as such has the prime force.

Reflection (*reverie*) exists in every culture (Martin Buber drew attention to it, recalling the image of a peasant who pauses for a moment, looks at the sun and indulges in thinking, or maybe just impressions). But what and how the person thinks or feels remains in the scope of his environmental verbal standards,¹ unacceptable in a world dominated by writing conventions (Derrida, 1999). Sometimes the functions of mediators between a peasant (autochthon) and a "civilised man" are taken over by the coryphaeus of European science: philosophers, ethnologists and anthropologists – it is them who attempt to explain the function of reflection in the so-called simple cultures.² It is worth emphasising, however, that the number of cultures with a writing, which enables meta-reflection, namely a reflection on one's own reflection (and someone else's, if the latter has been established), and thus the reflection on the way culture exists as a culture, is relatively small: by the mid-twentieth century, one in thirty-eight languages managed to generate literature (Ong, 1992). Currently, most of the cultures considered tribal from the perspective of the West already have literature, although not always written in the native language and for the needs of the local community, but presenting its history and specificity. According to the intuition of Jan Bronisław Pacukiewicz (the author's three-year-old son), culture is a "differentiator" (Pacukiewicz, 2021, p. 47), it is something that makes one group of people unlike another because an individual, limited by his biological condition, is able to remain in close relationships only with a relatively small number of other people.

The Culturology and the Culture

The book *Landscapes of Context* begins with a series of open questions, the most important of which is probably the subject of culturological research. The author's identity declaration that initiates this selection allows the writer to be identified with a discipline which recently formally ceased to exist in Poland. The question of what culturology is and what

¹ This concerns the ways of being expressive – that which is easy to remember and repeat. In pre-literate cultures, the word was not recorded, and thus, the statements that were too simple/crude for the elite who knew the script to be able and willing to pay attention to them were being formulated.

² Reflection exists in every culture, that is, it is a feature of human nature in general. The term *simple cultures* here is synonymous with pre-literate or non-scriptural cultures.

is the subject of culturological research has been accompanying the group of researchers for at least several decades, including Marek Pacukiewicz.

It is not easy to find an equivalent of the Polish word *kulturoznawstwo* in other European languages. In the Polish tradition, the word *znawstwo* refers to two types of competences: on the one hand, strictly theoretical competences, and on the other – practical, craft competences.³ Someone who has specific practical skills, often also possesses a general theoretical knowledge about the subject of his activities and about the principles/mechanisms of the functioning of this subject. However, theoretical competences do not always translate into practical skills. The question about the primacy of practical and/or theoretical knowledge (*znawstwo*) has divided the tradition of cultural sciences and triggered a whole series of questions about culture itself and its essence. Marek Pacukiewicz, attempting to resolve this issue within a specific discourse, juxtaposes various traditions of understanding culture and links the *znawstwo* with selected approaches in this tradition, clearly advocating for the necessity of recognizing the existential entity of culture (in the sense of materialised reality).

By adapting the overview of research methods to this status of culture, he looks for inspiration in the traditions of Aristotelian metaphysics, and by referring to the being as such, existing autonomously, he tries to build up his own reflection that organizes the knowledge about that being. He does it to present a number of approaches in cultural reflection, present in Europe at least since the end of the 18th century – a culturological reflection indebted to philosophical and theoretical thinking, making cultural practices a separate and necessary subject for methodological justification. He attributes an important role in shaping this reflection to Martin Heidegger, who “pointed out that metaphysics (as European thought in general) petrified the fundamental question about the existence of being” (Pacukiewicz, 2021, p. 33).

Culture understood as an entity that exists due to its being is precisely in this process of constitution, that is in the cognitive act of a human, made a creation dependent on human cognitive powers, including the perceptual abilities of an individual. Therefore, if a man does not perceive reality as something coherent as a whole, if his mind instructs him to give coherence to what cannot be coherent in the very process of perception, then the relationship between the act of perception and the ontological

³ “Znać się” is Polish reflexive verb, meaning: 1. “to know your own self”, 2. “to know one another”, 3. “to be highly knowledgeable or highly skilled in some field”; the verb it’s derived from “znać coś” means “to know something”, “to know”, “to know something about something”, “to be able to do something” (PWN Polish Dictionary, n.d.).

project⁴ requires additional epistemological justifications. Perhaps in the relation between what is perceived and what gives form and sense to the perception process lies the essence of culture, creating a network of acceptable ways of proper perception appropriate to a given group of people and allowing members of this group to create a community of people who perceive the surrounding reality in a similar way.

In the novel by Stanisław Lem, *Eden*, there is an extremely instructive theme concerning the effects of the non-native way of perceiving the planet on which earthly cosmonauts have landed. The cause of the initial misunderstandings with the inhabitants was a different distance between the eyes – only specially constructed glasses allowed the inhabitants of the Earth to enjoy the beauty of Eden. It seems that every culture, built over a long period of time in relative isolation, has developed its own glasses (glasses of language, a hierarchy of values, specialised competences, useful and useless goods, etc.) through which the man of this culture looks at the world. This does not mean that the “glasses” of one’s own culture influence its ontic status. Rather, they allow us to see the diversity of other cultures, the axiological shifts in them, the type of social relations, the “higher” or “lower” level of scientific and technical development, etc. Observations of these differences and attempts to summarize them theoretically led to the formulation of distributive, anthropological and sociological definitions of culture, which were an alternative, but at the same time, complementing the attributive, universalising definitions of philosophers. In the era of modernity, a discourse in which the philosophical approach was first relativised by anthropological and sociological thought began to take shape (Sapir, 1978, 2010; Whorf, 1982), and the initially competitive definitions of culture became complementary over time. Later, however, due to, among other things, the questioning of the results of empirical research, a return to the search for universal tools allowing for the description of various forms of the existence of the human world took place.

The Metaphysics

Pacukiewicz’s book is the evidence of a multifaceted search for an answer to the question about the ontic (existential) dimension of culture. The author does not hide that his intention is – on the theoretical level – to restore the metaphysical status of culture or, on the practical level, an attempt to look at *culture as culture* as a specific type of entity. The beginning

⁴ An ontological project, namely a construction (Heidegger, 1989), enabling the reception of the world to the measure of human cognitive powers.

for his considerations is the metaphysics of Aristotle, which in the era of late modernity and postmodernity, was turned into a set of ontological reflections, clearly epistemologically limited. The process of replacing metaphysics with ontology in relation to culture found its reflection in the humanistic discourse. The author proves this thesis meticulously and with erudition; his considerations include an overview of the research approaches that had the greatest impact on culturology in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The obvious rooting of these studies in earlier traditions allows the author to incidentally return to the approaches of both the classics of anthropology and the classics of philosophy. The main goal of the book is to organise research approaches to two basic concepts that Pacukiewicz associates with the metaphysics of culture: the *context* and the *landscape*. Each of them is rooted in the multi-threaded discourse of the humanities and the traditions of individual disciplines.

Pacukiewicz tracks how the substantial⁵ non-obviousness of culture as an entity translates – within the scope of theoretical and philosophical reflection – into a series of attempts which, in assumption (not always verbalised), are aimed at eliminating substantial internal differences. Although Aristotle already pointed out that there are beings whose substance is not apparent (Aristotle, 1933), the ontological and epistemological dispute over metaphysics does not die out to this day. One might ask why less cognitive emotions are aroused by the substantiality of reality as such than of *culture as culture*, but this does not resolve the essence of the dispute.

The issue of the substantiality of culture, and in fact, its substantively non-obvious status, is, among other things – as it seems – the result of various particular, local taxonomic divisions taken from tradition (Tyler, 1987/1993). Taxonomies and classifications, as well as typologisations, determine the ways of perceiving various types of beings. Movements between categories, which result in changes in the place in the hierarchy and their inclusion or exclusion from individual sets, affect the perception of the world by people. The conventional nature of classification

⁵ “In general, although Wisdom is concerned with the cause of visible things, we have ignored this question (for we have no account to give of the cause from which change arises), (...) and in the belief that we are accounting for their substance we assert the existence of other substances; but as to how the latter are the substances of the former, our explanation is worthless – for ‘participation,’ as we have said before, (...) means nothing. And as for that which we can see to be the cause in the sciences, and through which all mind and all nature works – this cause (...) which we hold to be one of the first principles – the Forms have not the slightest bearing upon it either. Philosophy has become mathematics for modern thinkers, (...) although they profess (...) that mathematics is only to be studied as a means to some other end.” (Aristotle, 1933)

(typologisation) provokes the question of the legitimacy of logical divisions. Various logics, the presence of which were indicated by both Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (Lévy-Bruhl, 1992) and Leon Petrażycki (1985), and ethnomethodologists headed by Ward Goodenough (Goodenough, 1964), developed for the use of various cultural systems, do not allow for obtaining a consensus on the living status of *culture as culture* in the attributive sense. But in the case of a distributive understanding, one must also take into account the heterogeneity of substances, which is characteristic of all complex objects.

The Metaphor

Landscapes of Context is a metaphorical title, but the title metaphor is well-entrenched in the discourse of contemporary humanities. The concept of context began to accompany linguistic deliberations from when Roman Jakobson, in his scheme of linguistic communication, distinguished – next to the sender and receiver – message, code, channel and context (Jakobson, 1960). If the context as a concept was originally related to the act of communication, then the communicative concept of culture derived from structuralism obviously had to adapt the context as a necessary condition for cultural communication. Lévi-Strauss's findings, however, concerned simple cultures, predominantly pre-literate. On the other hand, for hermeneutics irreducibly related to writing, the context of each text was a different text or other texts, which over time was also confirmed by intertextual research (Kristeva, 1983).

Pacukiewicz draws attention to the synchronicity of context (Pacukiewicz, 2021) and emphasises that in the discourse taking place in the humanities, the synchronous option prevails, translated into thinking about the context as space-time in which the phenomenon is actualised. However, he does not use the concept of *context* in relation to tradition and thus limits, at least in *Landscapes of Context*, thinking about a historical context – probably because this context is not so much an object of an experience as a reconstruction.

It might be assumed that culture is the result of a choice that establishes the continuity of reality perceived as discontinuous by the senses. Culture emerges from the surrounding reality as a result of educational processes that make each new member of a community undergo the basic acculturation process: paying attention to what is important and reducing the rest to a background from which only what is essential can be extracted. Therefore, we do not teach children to focus their attention on what is culturally non-discriminatory: when asked “what is that?” we answer “a house,” rarely inquiring whether the child meant an element of the

facade or scratched plaster. We warn our children against selected (known to us from the environmental context) types of danger. We get used to certain conventions necessary in the life of a given community and the potential consequences of not following them. *By making a choice, we reject* and use this mechanism to make not only the foundation of acculturation but also, perhaps more important in the light of Pacukiewicz's considerations, the basis for the legitimisation of the metaphysical background of our world, namely the existence of culture.

Several years ago, I had the opportunity to see an exhibition of French Impressionists in Böblingen. It was organised in a separate part of the local school building. The ceilings and walls of the completely darkened classrooms and corridors were lined with black cloth, on which paintings were displayed, illuminated by spotlights. I was surprised, as I was taught that Impressionist paintings look best in natural light. Only the sight of one of the versions of *Rouen Cathedral* by Claude Monet, displayed in a narrow corridor, but viewed from inside the classroom, allowed me to appreciate the professionalism of the exhibition curator: a completely unreadable image, passed indifferently in a tight space, suddenly came to life and allowed not only to identify the presented object but also revealed the mastery of painting technique.

Impressionist painting seems to have discovered the secret of the formation/creation of culture – the appropriate juxtaposition of semantic neutral points next to each other makes them a message. The patterns of some spots bring out the concrete, the patterns of others constitute the necessary context and, at the same time, the background from which the meaning emerges. Individual acquisition of knowledge about how to distinguish an essential cultural message from *what we learn not to perceive*, how to separate text from context, and how to extract meaning from the background is the essence of socialisation and the foundation of any culture⁶ (Linton, 1945).

There are no references to impressionism in Pacukiewicz's book, but there are beautiful essays devoted to Zbigniew Blukacz's cosmography and the artistic achievements of one of the precursors of geometric perspective, Paolo Uccello. The latter particularly inspired the researcher, who was convinced that "When trying to reach the metaphysical substance of an image, one must break through the ontological raster of context" (Pacukiewicz, 2021, p. 237). Blukacz interested him, among other things, because in his paintings "the role of the object is taken over by the landscape. Man

⁶ "A culture is the configuration of learned behavior and results of behavior whose component elements are shared and transmitted by the members of a particular society" (Linton, 1945, p. 32).

is placed in it, which means both emphasising its natural conditions and limitations, and the need to adopt a specific cognitive perspective” (Pacukiewicz, 2021, p. 231). In turn, in the work of Uccello, Pacukiewicz sees the irreducible importance of the landscape planted as the only local witness of the tragic events depicted on the predella in Urbino (Pacukiewicz, 2021, p. 257). Following in the footsteps of Uccello, Polish graphic artist Szymon Prandzioch in his mezzotints “performs an apparently simple but unusual operation: he moves the whole story, scene by scene, in time” (Pacukiewicz, 2021, p. 258), which allows Pacukiewicz to formulate a significant conclusion: “Uccello recombines the narrative of a variant of the famous legend, Prandzioch – scenes designed by the painter. They both strive for a synthesis based on the landscape present as both a place and a space” (Pacukiewicz, 2021, p. 261).

Conclusions

Marek Pacukiewicz is an outstanding theoretician of culture and, at the same time, a painterly sensitive poet struggling with the matter of the word, inadequate to the reality being described. He is interested in the way the human world exists and, at the same time, the metaphorical dimension of various ways of describing this world. His deliberations are constantly accompanied by the awareness that being as such cannot be translated into something of an ontically different nature. Therefore, he does not identify culture with language but knows that naming is the foundation of culture and an indispensable tool for reflecting on its essence. He is also aware that, paradoxically, not naming but metaphorising turns out to be helpful in approximating what exists beyond the matter of language (Pacukiewicz, 2021). He is also aware that “the more skillfully we manipulate the cognitive perspective, the more individual beings elude us, and our empathy may turn into a cognitive convention” (Pacukiewicz, 2021, p. 208). Throughout the book, we find traces of reflective reading, searching reading, filled with respect for the thoughts of the quoted authors.

Landscapes of Context is an attempt to organize the title issues. This book does not contain didactic attempts, it does not translate into easy recipes – it reflects on the specificity of the place that contemporary humanities have reached. Pacukiewicz proposes an in-depth reflection on the state and prospects of cultural sciences. The anxiety about the future of culturology, its usefulness and credibility, dominates the subtle emotional aura that discreetly surrounds the author’s argument. The tendency to objectify, to fairly present the opinions of other researchers, does not translate in this argument into simple judgments – rather into reflection on the

consequences of the discursive constitution of specific cognitive landscapes. Pacukiewicz does not formulate doubts, does not judge, does not criticise – he honestly reports on various ways of practicing science, but at the same time, his juxtapositions of alternative judgments, reconstructions of various thought traditions, are not free from emotional involvement accompanying the unverballed question “what is next?” Is it possible to return to the study of the essence of things, or are we doomed to spin eternally in the terrible cycle of discourse? What have we replaced “metaphysical dream” with, and how do we shape the landscape after the battle with metaphysics? Can it be ruled out that the successes of modern and postmodern epistemological strategies in the study of culture will ultimately contribute to a Pyrrhic victory?

These are questions that should not be taken lightly. And *Landscapes of Context* is a highly inspiring read worth paying attention to.

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