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**THICK DESCRIPTION AND THE CRISIS OF REPRESENTATION – AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL STUDY**

In 1986 two American cultural anthropologists, George E. Marcus and M. J. Fisher, published *Anthropology as Cultural Critique. An experimental moment in the human sciences* where they reflected on the discipline as it presented itself in the penultimate decade of the $20^{th}$ century. It appears, they argued, that the field was experiencing a crisis of representation that causes unsettling troubles with narrative depiction of the cultural reality. Empirically driven humanities (including cultural anthropology) apply "abstract, generalizing frameworks" with specific "paradigmatic style," which results in depicting the said reality in an incomplete manner. The problem was, they said, that "macro" level of generalizing concepts and "micro" level of cultural phenomena were incommensurate.

For the authors, the epitome of the style in question was the post-war sociology of Talcott Parsons, the prevailing force of American social thought until as late as the 60's. (One may similarly judge earlier theories of Herbert Spencer or Karl Marx, or contemporary structuralism). Since it had failed to accommodate real-life events, the model was exposed to criticism. In the 70's and 80's it was irony which served as a tool to dismantle the dominant system. Marcus and Fischer suggested that it was not for the first time in history that this specific approach had emerged in the humanities. It is rather of cyclic, or, better still, spiral character (i.e. the ironist is positioned further up than his ironic predecessor). These two decades thus

bear resemblance to the 20's and 30's when the great theories of liberalism, socialism and Marxism found themselves under heavy critique. Works of encyclopaedic structure were replaced by essays, pieces documenting varying social experiences, fragmentary studies, or even surrealistic experiments.

As the post-war USA took the reins of the global economy, one could sense a demand for equally overarching and synthetic social theory that would bring answers to crucial issues in sociology, anthropology, psychology, politics and economy. One sought to provide a complete abstract model of social systems and its linkages with culture and identity. The 60's witnessed a decline in those endeavours, since, as it was touched upon above, it could not have done justice to complex, multi-dimensional and fragmented phenomena of social change in America and elsewhere. "The current period, like the 1920s and 1930s before it, is thus one of acute awareness of the limits of our conceptual systems as systems" (Marcus, Fisher 1986: 12).

This comparison is for the above-quoted American anthropologists only a point of departure; inspired by *Metahistory*, an influential book of Hayden White published in 1973, they further explore the book's narrative on changes within nineteenth century European history (or historiography) and social theory to map out the way to follow their own field of study in the century to come. "Nineteenth-century historical writing, according to White, began and ended in an ironic mode. Irony is unsettling: it is a self-conscious mode that senses failure of all sophisticated conceptualizations; stylistically, it employs rhetorical devices that signal real or feigned disbelief on the part of the author toward the truth of his own statements; it often centers on the recognition of the problematic nature of language, the potential foolishness of all linguistic characterizations of reality; and so it revels — or wallows- in satirical techniques." (Marcus, Fisher 1986: 13).

Early nineteenth-century irony is, however, different from the irony practiced later in the age (remember its spiral character). In this period, historians and social theorists employed three paradigmatic representations of historical process to purify the representation marred by irony — Romance, Tragedy and Comedy. The first found its exponent in James Frazer, British ethnologist envisaging Reason on a quest to battle superstitions, much like Saint George fighting his dragons. Then tragedy came in the form of Marx and class conflict, derived from his earlier explorations on the alienation of human labour. Finally, the figure of Comedy inhabits the idea of social solidarity professed by Emile Durkheim. Contrary to Tragedy, Comedy allows us to recognise a momentary triumph and reconciliation, the role of festivities and rituals that bring competitors together. If we were to follow

White, the nineteenth-century historiography witnesses the transition from Romance to Tragedy, and from there to Comedy, ending (as the century draws to the close) in a deeply ironic mode. Works of Benedetto Croce and Friedrich Nietzsche are here exemplary.

The latter plays a crucial role in this paper; however, before we proceed further, let us first follow the thread we have already started to investigate. Marcus and Fischer suggest that in the 70's and 80's the ironic mode is rekindled, thus equipping those examining social life with a tool for distancing themselves from theories closed in uniforming universals. "The only way to an accurate view and confident knowledge of the world is through a sophisticated epistemology that takes full account of intractable contradiction, paradox, irony, and uncertainty in the explanation of human activities. This seems to be the spirit of the developing responses across disciplines to what we described as a contemporary crisis of representation" (Marcus, Fisher 1986: 14-15). In this context, American scholars turn to Clifford Geertz, who in the *Blurred Genres* advocates a specific strategy for the on-going exchange of concepts and ideas between the disciplines. This would serve the purpose of refreshing and redefining the field's theoretical baggage, releasing it from abstract entities, too stiff and incongruent with the ever-fluctuating reality. Geertz earned praise especially for his pioneering anthropological method that employed certain symbols or representations to discover intelligible (cultural) patterns of thinking (take note, this strategy resembles the romantic move). On the other hand, Geertz, to quote the authors, asked questions on the validity of "'scientific' objectivity" (Marcus, Fisher 1986: 14). In this way, Geertz's interpretive anthropology (being a discipline of semiotic origins) is utilized by Marcus and Fischer as a contemporary point of reference for handling the crisis of representation troubling the age.[1] I shall elaborate on this topic further on, but let me for now carry on with the analysis of the ideas developed by the American scholars.

Irony seems to be a flywheel of changes made to modes of representation of (social) reality. It pervades the 70's and 80's in their abandoning of uniform theory in pursuit of capturing the context of cultural phenomena, be it made from a political or historical perspective. Marcus and Fischer particularly underscore "a matter of representing in a narrative form social

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[1]By the way, Marcus and Fischer offer two techniques of cultural critique to remedy the crisis of representation: the epistemological critique and cross-cultural juxtaposition. I shall not pursue this topic here as it falls outside the main focus of my paper.

and cultural realities" (Marcus, Fisher 1986: 15). This idea, hermeneutic in its core, indicates the long way anthropology (ethnology) has come since its origins in nineteenth-century modernity, whether we trace its roots in geography or history (Europe), or in biology (America). Through a chain of internal transformations, authors argue, the discipline fulfils or is set to fulfil the task of cultural critique – eventually becoming a field of studies conscious of the environment it operates in, capable of redefining its research objectives. One may venture to ask where it stands today, years after the publication of the book (being one of the major texts of the discipline in the 80's). As it is not the goal of this paper, we shall not seek to answer that question. And what, precisely, is the goal?

Upon proclaiming the crisis of representation, Marcus and Fischer point to the key role played by Geertz in the process of redefining the methods of anthropological study. I would like to follow this thread by examining the means applied to depict cultural reality. For here arises a problem of critical importance, although never considered by the authors in the part of the book discussed. The problem is one of text thickness — a narrative tool used by Geertz elsewhere. I am aware, however, that in order to both adopt my own perspective and closely follow the narrative on historical changes presented by Marcus and Fischer I must precede the discussion on the issue of thickness with some remarks regarding the crisis of representation that springs to my mind when I confront the topic at hand with Nietzsche. Let me first refer to his text (curiously absent in the analysis carried out by American writers) and then revisit Geertz position with Nietzsche's reading in mind.

Some hundred years before Marcus and Fischer published their study, Nietzsche wrote an essay entitled *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense*. It advances a critique of epistemology and in this regard sits uneasily with American anthropologists' understanding of the German philosopher. This is not to say that his essay does not respond to the challenge identified by the authors of *Anthropology as Cultural Critique*. First, it may be of use to ask how Nietzsche understands truth. It is "a mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms — in short, a sum of human relations which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to people: truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are; metaphors which are worn out and without sensuous power; coins which have lost their pictures and now matter only as metal, no longer as coins (Nietzsche 1976: 46-47). Whereas his claim pertaining to a non-moral

context of truth and lies is fairly clear, it may be worthy to elucidate the core of Nietzsche's view on the cognitive context of such a defined state of affairs.

Why does he insist on metaphor as the constructive force of the world picture? The German philosopher exploits here the theme of the unavoidable imperfection of human perception and subsequent sharing with results thereof with other members of the community. Nietzsche's account of the double metaphorisation leading to a lie goes as follows: "nerve stimulus" (Nietzsche 1976: 46) is a human reaction to anything occurring in the world. (Today we would speak of sensory receptor field(s) being subject to stimuli, this clarification, however, is not fundamental to our discussion). The human mind then transforms this stimulus into an image. This is what Nietzsche calls the first metaphor. An image created in such a way is further transformed into sound, giving birth to the second metaphor. Let us remark here that the sound represents a concept, it is thus a product created by abstracting what is common (property or relation) from what is singular. For Nietzsche, metaphor is a relation (1) binding two incommensurable worlds, where (2) the world emerging later, i.e. the *residuum* of the transformed, is a disfigured reflection of the world that surfaced earlier.

Let us examine those two cases. In the context of (1), one may argue that the said transformations indicate that what we witness is transition from the physical world (nerve stimulus) towards the mental world (mind image), and then again to the physical world (sound). Why would those two worlds, physical and mental, be incommensurate? Certainly we deal here with the inherited Cartesian problem, but Nietzsche, following Kant, suggests that the human being has no (cognitive) access to noumena. She may only "perceive" things in an indirect way — through mental images, or physical sounds (already mediated by the former[2]). Since there is no master relation of conformity superior to both worlds, she can only "see" one through the prism of the other. Which brings us to (2). The transformation in question is of causal character, but it is not causality in the exact sense of the word. One may go on to say that it is the nerve stimulus that is the

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[2]One may add that reading of Kant may produce conclusions different from what is offered by Nietzsche. In this vein, Nietzsche is criticised by Heinrich Rickert, the German neo-Kantist of the Baden School. Two alternative perspectives of Kant's legacy are also put in the spotlight by Hilary Putnam, who seems to follow Rickert in what is called internal realism, or realism with a human face (or realism with a lowercase 'r', as put by Jerzy Kmita, a Polish scholar working in cultural studies). In this sense, Nietzsche may be treated as a "father" of postmodernism (or poststructuralism), which chimes with the interpretation favoured by Marcus and Fischer.

cause for occurrence of the image in the mind, but Nietzsche suggests here that what in fact comes into play is a relation of semblance (sealed in the form of illusion). If one was tempted to define the relation between the thing and the concept arguably corresponding to the former, it would occur that the concept "originates through our equating of what is unequal" (Nietzsche 1976: 46).

One can provide one example to support the case. Imagine one individual, John, looking at the table. Nerve stimulus is transformed in his mind into the image, and further into the sound representing the concept of the table. John can thus communicate the word "table" to his friend, Peter, who has not as yet seen this particular table. The question is: did Peter, upon hearing the word "table," imagine the table perceived by John? The answer must be "no." This, precisely, is Nietzsche's lie of words. Obviously, the German philosopher resorts to a shortcut that equates sound with a concept (concept does not belong to the physical world; moreover, one should differentiate between the concept and conception[3]), but it is interesting to follow his train of thought suggesting that there is a negative tone in the said incommensurability.

It resonates in two Nietzschean figures: a man of intuition and a man of reason. While interacting with the world, the first uses only the first metaphor, while the other both. What is the outcome? Equally dramatic for both. Whereas the man of intuition is arrested by mental images of things and is thus unreflectingly exposed to inconstancy and momentariness of the world, the man of reason shuts himself in stiff concepts and is therefore unable to experience the world of singular things. Nietzsche delivers here a truly dramatic conclusion. If people communicate through sounds, which represent concepts, therefore humans are inescapably forced to lie when trying to use them to render the world of things. It appears that the author of *On Truth and Lies. . .* testifies to a permanent crisis of representation.

If we were to settle with this conclusion, there would be no reason to await any positive answer from Marcus and Fischer who resolved to face the crisis of representation challenging the humanities (taken especially hard in anthropology). Let us take a closer look at one of the main characters in the story, Geertz, in hope to find this much-sought answer. More precisely, I shall turn to Geertz's essay *Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture.* Its reading lets us grasp characteristic elements of anthropology as semiotic discipline that studies culture as webs of significance.[4] What is

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[3]The problem was considered already by Plato and Descartes. It was also tackled by, *inter alia*, Kazimierz Twardowski.

[4]In his definition of culture, Geertz follows Max Weber.

significant is unearthed by the interpretation of human activity, being by its very nature not reflexive (albeit, as I show later, the observer may here find himself trapped) but intentional.

One method used in anthropological studies is ethnography, understood as giving meaning (or maybe intentions) to human activity. We cannot forget that the task before the anthropologist is twofold. First, when carrying out a field study, she encounters a potentially alien set of one's activities. This is when one tries to decode meanings. Secondly however, she produces an account of this endeavour for her likes. So ethnography consists in an actual contact with the alien (contrary to literature studies or history, anthropology seeks to understand activity experienced in a real-life spatiotemporal set-up) and delivering the report on this activity. According to Geertz, ethnography is defined by thick description. How does it work?

Geertz borrows the idea from Gilbert Ryle,[5] the exponent of British analytical philosophy. Thick description is an accumulation of meanings hidden behind the activity that can be recorded by body movements. Ryle gives the following example. Imagine there is a boy, let it be John that we have already met. John contracts the eyelid. Now his friend, Peter, appears and does that too. And then comes their buddy, Tom, who does the same. If we were to provide a description based on what we see, we would produce the same report in the case of John, Peter, Tom, and any other boy. This sort of description Ryle terms "thin," suggesting, as it were, that we record something obvious, simple, explicit. Note there are no questions regarding the cause(s) or motive(s) of the activity. One suggests that the activity, so to say, "speaks" on its own to the receiver.

But the scholar may investigate its causes (or motives). And so John may have a nervous tic, Peter "gives the eye," Tom parodies one of them. Of course, the difference between the report on John, and Peter or Tom lies in the application of different vocabularies, respectively physical and mental.[6] Let us remark that there may be some misunderstanding afoot. For example, a nervous tic may be interpreted as an intentional activity, but one may also construe it differently.[7] Mistakes notwithstanding, there exists one common element — namely the search for factors independent from but initiating

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[5]Ryle discussed thick description in his essays (Ryle 1971a; Ryle 1971b).

[6]Physical vocabulary defines the man as an (biological) adaptive system. Mental vocabulary sees her as a free being that grounds its acts in propositional attitude (which includes intentions). I discuss this elsewhere.

[7]Of course, while considering ethnography we generally mean intentional (not reflexive) activity, but it is secondary to the presented argument.

what is being ("thinly") described. Building on the case stated by Ryle, Geertz uses the category of thick description to analyse multidimensional aspects of cultural reality. For if asked what is the purpose of the said description, he would respond that it gives account of "a stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures in terms of which twitches, winks, fake-winks, parodies, rehearsals of parodies are produced, perceived, and interpreted, and without which they would not. . . in fact exist, no matter what anyone did or didn't do with his eyelids" (Geertz 1973: 7).

Geertz embarks on a highly ambitious endeavour. He is left dissatisfied by descriptions or explanations of human behaviour that would fit frameworks constructed by humanists, who since the Enlightenment modelled their undertakings on natural sciences and their stiff, generalizing hypotheses (which is part of the reason why one endures the crisis of representation today). For this pioneer of the subjective approach to culture it is human activity itself that lends meanings (or maybe even propositional attitude). This approach frees them from the stiff girdle of theory, instead, they are allowed to be imposed — as individual products — by acting subjects. Attempts to understand the (essentially) symbolic character of the activity of indigenous inhabitants of Bali or Morocco (studied in due time by Geertz himself) turns into the opportunity to reiterate the understanding of ourselves who, by interpreting others, gradually come to do the same with their own activities. But does not Geertz fall into the trap left by Nietzsche? Is not thick description, allowing us to access ever-deeper layers of meanings (and intentions), by nature burdened by lie (thus prolonging the crisis of representation)?

It is not, and for one reason. Geertz himself would never deny that thick description cannot penetrate the web of significance completely or perfectly. For understanding is meant as an infinite process. One may recall here the idea of truth as non-secrecy. Undoubtedly, this solves nothing, since one may assume that getting to what is significant is of processual character but nevertheless remain arrested by the illusion that one arrived somewhere. Something else is at stake here, namely the revision of one's own description of somebody else's activity. In other words, it is the capability of distancing from the image constructed hitherto. This is precisely the moment where the power of irony comes into play – irony that even Nietzsche cannot escape. For it is fair to ask whether the condition, on which the absolute conclusion (that words lie out of necessity) holds, is always met. Let us assume that two individuals share common experiences, their agreement on certain fragments of the world may be highly improbable, but still possible. Further, if words

are by nature burdened by lie, why do we accept this currency when provided by Nietzsche himself?[8] It is the possibility of revision of the results produced by the (thick) description that gives opportunity to receive feedback that we are on one of the paths leading to meanings and intentions, if maybe never finally reaching them.

And so we arrive at another issue related to what has been said above, namely the opposition of thin description and thick description, offered by Ryle and adopted by Geertz. The question is: where lies the value of thin description? What information do we gain when it is applied? I venture to say that, detached from thick description, thin description says nothing, is description in name only. Why? Let us resort again to the eyelid example. When I hear that John (or any other boy) made such a gesture, how do I understand what happened? Obviously, I am capable of completing certain operations, mental or formal associations. I know that under the eyelid there are muscles that can contract if ordered so by the nervous system, and that such contractions may be reflexive or intentional. It is a wholly different matter whether these (and other) associations are correct; it does not, however, change the fact that failing to make associations renders it impossible to understand the given activity. (I do not consider here any pre-understanding, or mystical understanding, as it is not possible to give any description of it).

Owing to this, I believe it is futile to separate thin description as something intelligible and independent that perfectly stands on its own, without resorting to other descriptions of factors generating the examined activity. I suggest, therefore, that the researcher never entirely deals with thin description, but that it rather must always be thick in the first place. What we need is an awareness that description is gradable. In this vein, writing about eyelid contraction would contain less thickness than writing about the parodying of one's "making the eye." This take on the issue allows us to eliminate the ostensible entity and preserve the idea of description that does justice to the holistic nature of language, and we can also treat understanding as a process. And one more thing: all that was said here testifies that a research activity cannot escape the crisis of representation. But this is not to say that crisis must be permanent. A combination of irony (or other forms of distance or revision) and gradation of a description's thickness allows the scholar to confront anytime descriptions produced in various periods of time thus making the crisis of representation manageable (or at least making us aware

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[8]See *supra 3*. It may be of use to mention here Jacques Derrida's critique of Edmund Husserl.

that it is an ever-present threat). Knowing, however, that too large a distance triggers unwelcome consequences (Nietzsche's example seems to deliver a satisfying account on the matter), the scholar should never deny the value of the thick description, however little it may be. So, what is there to avoid in a scholar's research (of cultural reality)? She should navigate between the Scylla of crisis of representation and Charybdis of thick description, bearing at the same time in mind that it rarely happens that one accomplishes this feat unscathed. But that's another story.

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