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Mediaevalism as an Example of Reception Studies

Abstract: The construction of statements about the past is to a large extent a reconstruction of how the past is imagined. Past culture is not given to contemporaries except through a relic or trace, while discourse or narrative produced is an imagistic activity. Using the example of contemporary trends in mediaevalist research, this article shows three clear tendencies in the way the past is treated: as a phantasm, a translated text and a discursive element. All these mechanisms are inscribed in cultural comparativism, which can be understood as a model of 'reading' past culture (through) and (into) contemporary culture. Mediaevalism is understood here as a representation of a supra-historical and transcultural comparative study. Such an approach makes it possible to prove that the study of reception is in fact an activity in the spirit of cultural comparativism.

Keywords: reception studies, mediaevalism, hermeneutics of trace, imagology, discourse.

When the acclaimed film *The Passion of Christ*, directed by Mel Gibson, entered cinemas in 2004, critics and audiences alike marvelled at the incredible authenticity of the story depicted. It was said that the film respected the historical side, taking care to show the Jerusalem of two thousand years ago and the Stations of the Cross as they probably looked. The use of Aramaic in the dialogue and of Latin in its Middle Eastern, slightly vulgarised form, as well as the literal adherence to the Gospel text, reconstructing the events of the Passion, were appreciated. What was emphasised was the extraordinary attention paid to detail, which was supposed to prove the realism and cred-

ibility of the story. Historians had no doubt that the director had benefited from archaeological findings and knowledge of the local culture. Critics repeatedly claimed that the director relied not only on the Gospel accounts, but also on the findings of pathologists studying the so-called Shroud of Turin and other sources of scientific-historical knowledge. The audience reacted in a similar way, whose most frequent comment after watching the film was that “this is how it must have been”.¹

Almost twenty years later, Ridley Scott’s latest spectacle devoted to the legend of Napoleon, the French emperor, was released. Known for his unorthodox approach to history, the director, who interprets historical facts in a way that is convenient for himself for the purposes of his films, was immediately met with huge criticism from historians. If audiences reacted to the film as typical entertainment, seeing it above all as a well-told story, academics criticised the film maker extremely harshly. They accused him of a lack of any reference to facts and of a casual depiction of historical events. Evidence of this imaginativeness in Scott’s work was said to be the scant number of consultants (just two), whom the director himself reportedly did not listen to anyway. The director’s response to such accusations was a statement made on the BBC: “Were you there? Ah, you weren’t. So how do you know?”.

Both examples of the reactions are the obverse and reverse of the same coin. It is about the perception of the past, which throughout the generations has primarily been a set of beliefs or perceptions about it. This was very aptly and emphatically expressed by Gerhard Lubich at the meeting “Middle Ages: digital and virtual – objects, practices, reflections” at Ruhr University, who stated that the only things that are available to us today from that time are stones and manuscripts – the rest is narrative. In the context of mediaevalist research, Professor Lubich’s sentence sounds ostentatious, but it, by no means, closes the research perspective.² One can take these words as a stimulus to reflect on contemporary trends in the study of the past. After all, isn’t Lubich right to say that we only have traces?

Trace and Imagination

The category of trace, described in the context of hermeneutics by Barbara Skarga, makes it possible to define this phenomenon on the borderline

¹ Tomasz Królak, and Joanna Operacz, “*Pasja*” Gibsona – opinie po nieoficjalnym pokazie [Gibson’s “Passion” – Reviews after Unofficial Screening], 7.02.2004, accessed January 9, 2024, <https://www.ekai.pl/pasja-gibsona-opinie-po-nieoficjalnym-pokazie/>.

² The audiovisual recording of the speech of 23.10.2023 can be found on the Youtube platform: Gerhard Lubich, “Middle Ages: digital and virtual – Objects, Practices, Reflections,” Ruhr University, accessed January 9, 2024, <https://youtu.be/7QdAekOMbUg>.

between ontology and imagology. A trace exists in a specific space and time. As a sign, it has its own semantic and signifying value, and at the same time it refers to what is not there.

Ślad odsyła do przeszłości, do tego, co było, ale już nie jest, przynajmniej tu i teraz. To znak fenomenu z przeszłości, czegoś, co się wydarzyło, minęło, pozostawiło jednak swoją pieczęć mniej lub bardziej wyraźną, taką właśnie, jak skorupy wykopywane przez archeologa, służące za dowód istnienia tej czy innej kultury.³

[A trace refers to the past, to what was but is no longer, at least here and now. It is the sign of a phenomenon from the past, something that has happened, has passed, but has left its stamp more or less distinct, just like the shells excavated by the archaeologist, serving as proof of the existence of this or that culture.]

These are those manuscripts or stones in the form of ruins, cathedrals, castles that we have today. Ruins, charred remains or even reasonably well-preserved remains of former times are not a mirror image of the past, but only something that resembles a footprint reflected in the sand. This footprint tells us as much about the presence as about the absence⁴. As Barbara Skarga writes: “Między śladem i tym, co ślad zostawiło, tkwi napięcie niejednoznaczności i niedoskonałego wskazania, większej lub mniejszej odpowiedniości, dystans nieraz tak odległy, że szyfr kryjący się w śladzie nie pozwala się odczytać”⁵ [Between the trace and that which left the trace lies the tension of an ambiguous and imperfect indication, of greater or lesser appropriateness, a distance sometimes so far away that the cipher hidden in the trace does not allow itself to be read]. The trace should therefore be understood as an interpretative category that is easily attributed to semiotic analysis.

Charles Sanders Peirce, writing about the three correlates of the sign, points to the important role of the interpretant. Peirce calls this the third

³ Barbara Skarga, *Ślad i obecność* [Trace and Presence] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2002), 29–30.

⁴ See: “Interesują mnie nie zwykle używane w odniesieniu do przeszłości określenia: obecna (*present*) i nieobecna (*absent*), ale pojęcia drugorzędne, a zatem przeszłość, która jest *non-absent* [*non-absent past*] (przeszłość, która nie jest nieobecna, tzn. której nieobecność się jawi) czy też *non-present* [*non-present past*] (przeszłość, która jest nie-obecna, tzn. której obecność się nie jawi). Pojęcia te, chciałabym przy tym widzieć, nie jako opozycyjne, ale jako konkurujące ze sobą.” [I am interested not in the terms usually used to refer to the past: *present* and *absent*, but in secondary terms, and thus in a past that is *non-absent* [*non-absent past*] (a past that is not absent, i.e. whose absence appears) or *non-present* [*non-present past*] (a past that is non-present, i.e. whose presence does not appear). These concepts, I would like to see in doing so, not as oppositional, but as competing with each other]. Ewa Domańska, “Archeontologia martwego ciała. (Kontemplacyjne podejście do przeszłości)” [Towards an Archeontology of the Dead Body. (A Contemplative Approach to the Past)], *Er(r)go*, no. 3 (2001): 52.

⁵ Skarga, *Ślad i obecność*, 31.

element of the sign, alongside the signifiant (representative) and signifié (object). In this view, the space between the signifier (the present) and what the signified has left behind (the past) becomes part of mediation. Mediation is an interpretive category that negotiates meanings. The category of the interpretant, therefore, determines the role that the sign is supposed to play for something or someone at a given time. Thus, mediation is always political, for it ascribes the intuitive cognition of a trace to symbolic values, formed at a given historical moment and for a given community. Any reconstruction of a trace is fundamentally an ideological activity.

As the centuries-old tradition of reading the past, or should we say using the past to interpret the present, shows, the present appropriates the past in order to describe itself. Therefore, as Marek Zaleski notes:

[...] obraz przeszłości dostępnej w naszym o niej wyobrażeniu i jego intensywność, to zawsze mniej aniżeli przecucie naszej o niej pamięci, cząstkowej i spowitej kirem zapomnienia. Nasza pamięć z kolei, poddana władzy, jaką sprawuje nad nią nasza terażniejszość, jest zawsze uboższa od przeszłości, danej intuicyjnie w nieprzekładalnych na obrazy pomyśleniach o niej.⁶

[[...] the image of the past available in our perception of it, and its intensity, is always less than the premonition of our memory of it, partial and shrouded in the cire of oblivion. Our memory, on the other hand, subject to the power exercised over it by our present, is always poorer than the past, given intuitively in thoughts about it that cannot be translated into images.]

Under the guise of a cult of the past, there hides a cult of the present.

Such an interpretative category is mediaevalism, which Leslie Workman – one of the initiators of this field of research on Anglo-Saxon soil – has defined as the phenomenon of constructing the shape of the Middle Ages under the influence of the perceptions of the viewer, that is, on the basis of his or her reading and cultural experiences.⁷ Mediaevalism is not so much about a contemporary reference to mediaeval beliefs, practices or aesthetics (style)⁸ as it is about a cultural imaginary on the basis of which a belief in the Middle Ages is constructed. Such an imaginary consists of certain properties or characteristics attributed to a culture on the basis of contemporary judgments or opinions about antiquity. John Simmons writes straightforwardly that mediaevalism is treated as a discourse (about the discourse itself more

⁶ Marek Zaleski, *Formy pamięci* [Forms of Memory] (Gdańsk: Słowo/obraz/terytoria, 2004), 12–13.

⁷ Leslie Workman's position is presented in the work on the reception of his research in the volume: *Medievalism in the Modern World. Essays in Honour of Leslie Workman*, eds. Richard Utz, and Tom Shippey (Turnhout: Brepols 1998).

⁸ "Medievalism," in Collins English Dictionary, accessed January 9, 2024, <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/medievalism>.

later) used to shape, contest and comment on other times.⁹ Thus, mediaevalism reminds us of its imagological construction, emphasising the pictorial, and thus mental, ephemeral, without clearly delimited boundaries, image of the Middle Ages.

Imagology as a research method is based on the category of interpretive community within which the imaginary is created. Paraphrasing Jan Błuszkowski's statement about the stereotype,¹⁰ one could say that each cultural community constructs its own specific ways of imagining the past. These tend to be similar, analogous and typical. They arise from individual diverse afterimages of it.¹¹ They look for 'common places' that define a shared imaginary for the whole group. What cements the shared imaginary of a culture is the language and its products, such as literature and, more recently, journalism and the language of the media, including the audiovisual. The images produced and perpetuated in this way, supported by cultural traditions, play a key role in shaping mentalities – and thus ideas about the past – in this case the Middle Ages. At the same time, it is worth noting that the further one moves away from the Middle Ages, the more powerfully its symbolic value affects the cultural audience. Nowadays, it is no longer possible to speak of semiotic concreteness, but only of its interpretation in the key offered by a given moment of reading together with the entire methodological apparatus or language.

In order to better understand the assumptions of this text, it is worth referring to research published in 2009 on the presence of the 'civitas diaboli' motif and the image of the mediaeval inquisitor in Polish post-war literature.¹² On the basis of an analysis of several novels (*Tylko Beatrycze* by Teodor Parnicki, *Ciemności kryją ziemię* by Jerzy Andrzejewski, *Msza za miasto Arras* by Andrzej Szczypiorski, the Hussites trilogy by Andrzej Sapkowski and the tetralogy on wizard Witelon by Witold Jablonski), it was shown that

⁹ John Simmons, "Christopher Middleton on Elizabethan Medievalism," in *Medievalism in the Modern World. Essays in Honour of Leslie Workman*, 44.

¹⁰ Jan Błuszkowski, *Stereotypy a tożsamość narodowa* [Stereotypes and National Identity] (Warszawa: Dom Wydawniczy Elipsa, 2005), 16.

¹¹ Lidia Wiśniewska writes that imagology tends towards an attitude that implies a reliance on the principle of *coincidentia oppositorum*. See: Lidia Wiśniewska, "Konstruktywistyczny wymiar komparatystyki" [The Constructivist Dimension of Comparativism], in *Komparatystyka i konteksty. Komparatystyka między Mickiewiczem a dniem dzisiejszym II* [Comparatistics and Contexts. Comparatistics between Mickiewicz and Today II], ed. Lidia Wiśniewska (Bydgoszcz: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Kazimierza Wielkiego, 2012), 26.

¹² Adam Regiewicz, *Ślady obecności średniowiecznego wizerunku inkwizytora i „civitas diaboli” w polskiej literaturze fantasy po roku 1989* [Traces of the Presence of the Medieval Image of the Inquisitor and 'Civitas Diaboli' in Polish Fantasy Literature after 1989] (Zabrze-Racibórz: Wydawnictwo Scriba, 2009).

the historical trace of records of inquisition trials left in ecclesiastical and historical writings became a carrier of symbolic meanings for contemporary communication, namely, worldview, cultural and even political. In some cases it was a metaphor for the present, in others it served as a synecdoche, calling on the reader to fill in the blanks with his or her imagination, and finally the trace was a gesture of irony that reverses the order and becomes a tool for critical evaluation. The last case in particular, because of its popularity, fairly wide readership and its treatment of the Middle Ages as a prop room from which the necessary costumes are taken out, is extremely important. The irony used there led to a confrontation between modern man, brought up in a rationalist and liberal spirit, and the mediaeval worldview in which the story was immersed. It is readily apparent that the clash between these two cultural objects will not fall in favour of the Middle Ages. However, it is not the conclusion itself that is important here, but the mechanism. For the authors discussed in that study accomplish what is the essence of imagology: they confront a communally shaped idea of antiquity.

In view of the above conclusions, one might ask, is it only literature that measures itself against the emerging imaginaries in the encounter of cultures? Perhaps it is worth tracing some narratives of cultural comparativism, which conducts an intercultural and ahistorical dialogue of cultures, juxtaposing often historically and spatially distant regions such as modernity and the Middle Ages in mediaevalism.¹³ In the following steps, I would like to look at three phenomena present in mediaeval studies: phantasm, translation and discourse.

Phantasm

The mental image of the past (in this case the Middle Ages), shaped above all by the imaginings of the members of the interpretative community – the cultural group – makes it possible to define mediaevalism as a kind of phantasm. Maria Janion, researching the phantasm in Romantic literature, drew attention to the affinity of this phantasm with the phenomenon of fantasy, so strongly affecting Romantic man.¹⁴ Fantasy is not so much falsehood or illu-

¹³ Adam Regiewicz, “Średniowieczność w perspektywie komparatystycznej” [The Middle Ages in Comparative Perspective], in *Mity i motywy w perspektywie komparatystycznej. Komparatystyka między Mickiewiczem a dniem dzisiejszym III* [Myths and Motifs in Comparative Perspective. Comparatistics between Mickiewicz and Today III], ed. Lidia Wiśniewska (Bydgoszcz: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Kazimierza Wielkiego, 2013), 59–112.

¹⁴ Maria Janion, *Projekt krytyki fantazmatycznej. Szkice o egzystencjach ludzi i duchów* [The Project of Phantasmatic Criticism. Sketches on the Existences of Humans and Ghosts] (Warszawa: PEN, 1991), 7.

sion, but imagination, which takes over the perception of reality. Janion points out that Romanticism undermined the classicist understanding of tradition, reduced to a reservoir of souvenirs, finding it too limiting. Instead, Romanticism proposed a mythicising approach, offering the possibility of a broader, symbolic, interpretation. Horace Walpole, commenting on his Gothic novel *The Castle of Otranto*, written at the end of the 18th century and considered the beginning of the new Romantic genre, wrote: "I allowed myself to be ruled by unfettered imagination, uncontrolled visions and passions. I wrote against the rules, the critics and the philosophers".¹⁵ In this way, the past ceased to be held hostage to dates and events and became part of a narrative – a story. Moreover, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the English poet considered a precursor of Romanticism and known for introducing fantastical themes into his poems, commented that it is fantasy that allows the element of direct cognition to be transformed into an image.¹⁶

The image of the past is left in the hands of the imagination, which imposes on humans a view of the situation in which they find themselves. The phantasm is a kind of filter, formed under the influence of strong inner convictions (these fantasies arising under the influence of a certain state of mind and the cultural context of the era), through which one looks at the past. One could say that the phantasm plays the role of a mask or costume behind which are hidden the needs or desires of modern man, who looks at the past, projecting it according to his or her expectations. The phantasm is thus a projection of contemporaneity onto the past. A projection that is not so much overt, but precisely latent, or even unconscious, in the Freudian sense of the term.

If we apply the assumptions of phantasm to mediaevalism, it turns out that it is tailored precisely to the idea of the imaginative construction of the Middle Ages. Mediaevalism, as Maciej Michalski notes, is not only a reproductive process, but also a creative one, and this in a dual sense: the construction of references to the Middle Ages and the construction of the Middle Ages itself.¹⁷ Mediaevalism is therefore not so much about the possibility of merely recreating the past as it is about re-constructing it according to the spirit of the times. From this approach stems the strongly interpretative character of mediaevalism, taken as a phantasm. This character changes de-

¹⁵ Cited by Janion, *Projekt krytyki fantazmatycznej. Szkice o egzystencjach ludzi i duchów*, 8.

¹⁶ "Fantasy in Coleridge Poetry," in *Jud's Creative Writing Medley. Artwork, Haiku, Poetry, Stories, Novels, Literary Essays & Thesis*, accessed January 11, 2024, <https://judsjottings.wordpress.com/essays/fantasy-in-coleridges-poetry/>.

¹⁷ Maciej Michalski, "Wokół definicji mediewalizmu" [Around the Definition of Medievalism], *Sobótka*, no. 1 (2011): 86.

pending on the mental construction of the era or cultural group in question. The Enlightenment will look at the past – this particular mediaeval past – in a different way, and Romanticism, Modernism or even our contemporary postmodernism will look at it in a different way. In each period the Middle Ages operate with a different phantasm, adapted to the cultural matrix of its time,¹⁸ therefore on the one hand images of the “dark Middle Ages” created by Renaissance and Enlightenment cultural narratives are used, on the other hand a heroic and at the same time magical Middle Ages as a result of a Romantic myth (Maria Janion writes that “the Middle Ages for us is the Middle Ages plus the Romantic myth of the Middle Ages”¹⁹) or the Middle Ages of the vagantes or carnivalesque, which were so much exposed at the end of the 19th century by the culture of Modernism. Nowadays, the Middle Ages are read in a kind of contrast to modernity and today’s understanding of reality,²⁰ they are understood as completely incompatible with the rules of social life and modern culture (more primitive, natural, sensual or even barbaric²¹), from which very often extreme conclusions are drawn and judgements are constructed that lead to a boundless fascination or an unreflective rejection of everything associated with the Middle Ages.

This perspective can be shown using two phenomena present in the research narrative. The first can be identified as a reflection built around the motif of the witch and the mediaeval accusations of *malefici*. The theme first appears in Romantic texts, thanks to the famous book *The Witch* by Jules Michelet. As seen by this historian, whose work analyses the conceptualised forms of the presence of the Evil One and its functions, subjecting them to cultural interpretation, the witch fits into the Romantic myth of rejection. Michelet operates with categories typical of Romanticism: inverted aesthetics (evil is beautiful), ethics (truth need not be evil), social order (the individual has more value than the whole), constructing a completely different image of the witch as young, feminine, sensual and beautiful.²² These very

¹⁸ I wrote about this in the book: Adam Regiewicz, *Mediewalizm wobec zjawisk audiowizualnych i nowych mediów* [Medievalism in Relation to Audiovisual Phenomena and New Media] (Warszawa: DiG, 2014), 21–22.

¹⁹ Maria Janion, “Studia o romantycznych ideach. Estetyka i natura” [Studies in Romantic Ideas. Aesthetics and Nature], in Maria Janion, *Prace wybrane, vol. 4, Romantyzm i jego media* [Selected Works, vol. 4, Romanticism and its Media] (Kraków: Universitas, 2001), 13.

²⁰ Stuard Y. McDougal, *Ezra Pound and the Troubadour Tradition* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1974).

²¹ Colin N. Manlove, “Flight to Alepo: T. H. Whites 'The Once and Future King',” *Mosaic. A Journal for the Comparative Study of Literature and Ideas* 10, no. 2 (1977): 67.

²² Cf. Foreword by Jules Michelet ‘On Benefits’: “‘Czarownice wyobrażamy sobie jako straszliwe wiedźmy Makbeta. Ale okrutne procesy dowodzą czegoś wręcz przeciwnego. Wiele czarownic zginęło właśnie dlatego, że były młode i piękne” [We imagine witches as Mac-

attributes are, according to Michelet, the reason for the accusation of women, who are suddenly perceived as a threat caused by fear, jealousy, bitterness resulting from rejection, etc. Michelet consistently argues that the myth of the witch is the product of a hateful theology, which appears as an overarching worldview construct, and human corruption. Because of human weaknesses, these very causes are able to formulate false accusations. Thus, we are dealing with issues typical of Romanticism: resistance to the imposing world-view construct, the attitude of rebellion, the cult of the individual – the person who rises above mediocrity, and emotions which, as in Shakespeare, determine human fate.

Michelet's thinking proved to be extremely fertile, as it became a staple of feminist ideas based on the myth of the witch. One of the first women to fight for women's rights, Matilda Joslyn Gage, echoes Michelet's key findings, incorporating them into the struggle for equality.²³ This witch tropes of feminism seem extremely relevant, as the image of the witch as a sign of struggle against the oppressive model of patriarchal culture has been shaped in the spirit of contemporary feminist criticism. An expression of just such an understanding of the mediaeval image of the witch in the context of the contemporary model of knowledge can be found in by Mona Chollet's book *Sorcières: La puissance invaincue des femmes*.

Chollet refers to the cultural image of the witch as an unmarried woman or water, having no offspring, standing out in appearance (both in terms of extraordinary beauty and old age or ugliness) from the majority of society, having knowledge of female physiology (a witch is one who knows), financially independent, not respecting the rules of moral life accepted by the general public, etc. The author of the monograph presents the witch not only in the perspective of past 'witch hunts', but also of contemporary manifestations of discrimination that manifest themselves today at the level of cultural practices or language. Chollet says explicitly at one point that the witch is not so much a victim of the old times as of the new, contemporary times. Why? Because the witch, as a cultural figure, "ucieleśnia [...] kobietę wyzwoloną od wszelkiej dominacji, od wszelkich ograniczeń, stanowi ideał, do którego na-

beth's terrible witches. But the cruel trials prove the opposite. Many witches were killed precisely because they were young and beautiful]. Jules Michelet, *Czarownica*, trans. Maria Kaliska (PULS, London 1993), 16.

²³ In her 1893 book *Woman, Church and State*, Matilda Joslyn Gage argued for the primacy and superiority of matriarchy over patriarchy, which was to be demonstrated by the practice of witchcraft as an implementation of the priestly fertility cult (including the cult of Diana or the cult of Ishtar). Matilda J. Gage, *Woman, Church and State: a Historical Account of the Status of Woman through the Christian Ages, with Reminiscences of the Matriarchate* (Aberdeen: Sky Carrier Press, 1998 [1893]).

leży dążyć, wskazuje nam drogę”²⁴ [embodies the woman liberated from all domination, from all constraints, constitutes an ideal to be pursued, shows us the way]. Consequently, Chollet treats witchcraft as a gesture of disenchantment of a collective consciousness, developed by male symbols and models of knowledge. Thus, she understands being a witch as a process of releasing the unquestionable, the arbitrary, the doctrinal, seeing in this figure a postmodern principle for the discursivisation of the world and its narratives. And just as Michelet uses the phenomenon of the witch to expose the archetype of primordial rebellion against traditional society, Mollet, as a child of the postmodern belief in tolerance and pluralism, sees in the figure of the witch an example of the heterogeneity of culture.

Another example of the phantasm analysed here, through which the past is read, may be the metaphor of the outlaw used by Zygmunt Bauman. In the mediaeval tradition, banishment was a social instrument aimed at removing individuals who did not respect the commonly accepted rules of life, and a legal instrument aimed at punishing individuals who violated the order of collective life by committing crimes. Banishment was an institutional solution, that is, it was part of the code of written law.²⁵ Bauman uses the mediaeval concept of the outlaw to describe the state of contemporary exclusion of people who remain on the margins of social life due to their inability or unwillingness to participate in consumption.²⁶ The Polish sociologist thus uses the normative phenomenon to explain the ostracism faced by poor people who cannot participate in the ritual of shopping. He attributes to the new ‘strangers’ or ‘vagabonds’, as Bauman calls them, characteristics typical of outlaws, pointing to similar practices applied to such people: separating them from the healthy fabric of a society that purchases goods, excluding them from the zone of consumption by constructing appropriate cordons guarded by the security of shopping centres or shops, etc.

The examples cited make two things clear. First, reflection on the past is always a construction of its imaginary. And this happens through the contemporary filter that we apply to the past along with the cultural narrative. Secondly, the study of antiquity ceases to refer to hard semiotic concreteness in the form of these “cathedral stones” or castles or manuscripts, but moves

²⁴ Polish translation: Mona Chollet, *Czarownice: niezwykła siła kobiet*, trans. Sławomir Królak (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Karakter 2019), 9. Original: Mona Chollet, *Sorcières: La puissance invaincue des femmes* (Paris: Zones, 2018).

²⁵ Hanna Zaremska, *Banici w średniowiecznej Europie* [Outlaws in Medieval Europe] (Warszawa: Semper, 1993), 8.

²⁶ Zygmunt Bauman, *Ponowoczesność jako źródło cierpienia* (Warszawa: SIC!, 2000), 11–23. Original: Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodernity and its Discontents* (New York: New York University Press 1997).

towards a symbolic model that is as much the domain of ideology as of the imaginary. It is difficult, therefore, not to see that the mediaevalist study understood in this way is heavily immersed in imagology, that is, the approach ascribed to cultural comparativism. About it Hugo Dyserinck wrote: Imagological comparatistics seeks above all to grasp each form of the disclosure of *images* and the manner in which they are produced and interact.²⁷ Isn't this precisely what the cited examples were about? Thus, cultural *images* – mediaeval and post-modern, ancient and modern, *images* that are provided to the modern reader as much by literature as by the texts of media culture – juxtaposed against each other are the basis of comparative action.

Translation

The juxtaposition of temporally distant cultural areas, viewed as separate entities, raises the question of translation as a method of understanding the 'past' today. As the example of the phantasm has shown, the past operates primarily with *images*, which are the basis for thinking about the past as an imagined category. Thus, in attempting to apply this imaginary category to contemporary thinking about the world, one would have to treat the past as a concrete imaginary community,²⁸ operating within specific boundaries, using a single language, and stimulated by fairly clearly delineated political goals and cultural practices. In this way, the reading of the past by the present would resemble the principle of translation from one language to another.

If one were to try to reread the earlier examples of reading mediaeval phenomena through the prism of the present, one would find that we are dealing with precisely the kind of translation that, as Lawrence Venuti notes, always has an ideological dimension.²⁹ This is because every translation releases a kind of surplus of meaning that includes categories of values, beliefs or representations incorporated into the historical circumstances and social positions of the target culture. This is what we observed when analysing the figure of the witch and the outlaw inscribed in contemporary worldview discourse.

²⁷ Cf. Hugo Dyserinck, *Komparatistik: eine Einführung* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1991), 131.

²⁸ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London–New York: Verso, 1991), 6.

²⁹ Cited by Lawrence Venuti, "Przekład, wspólnota, utopia" (*Translation, Community, Utopia*), trans. Magda Heydel, in *Współczesne teorie przekładu. Antologia* [Contemporary Theories of Translation. An Anthology], eds. Piotr Bukowski, and Magda Heydel (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Znak, 2009), 288. Original: Lawrence Venuti, "Translation, community, utopia," in *The Translation Studies Reader*, ed. Lawrence Venuti (London–New York: Routledge, 2000), 468–488.

The examples presented above show quite clearly that the key strategy of defining the past by the present is the formula of adapting what is foreign. The classical cognitive mechanism is obviously at work here, which always compares what is new (even if it is old) with what is available and understandable now. For, ultimately, it is all about understanding. In this attitude is reflected the hermeneutic attitude, according to which translation is neither about sameness nor literalism, but about re-performance. Translation is not based on the transposition of words, but on the utterance of the state of affairs to which a phenomenon refers by means of the meanings closest to that phenomenon. According to this assumption, translation is an activity of mediation rather than an activity of restoration or reconstruction of meaning.³⁰ Indeed, the success of translation depends on whether a comprehensible and convincing sense is formed on the basis of the processed meanings.

Another aspect of translation is highlighted by postcolonial discourse, which sees a tension between foreign and native language in the strategy of translation. It can be understood in the context discussed here as a tension between the language of the past and the language of the present. The foreign language does not superimpose itself on the mother tongue like a mere palimpsest, but transforms it, writes Abdelkebir Khatibi.³¹ That is to say, in translation one can see inculcated cultural systems that move with the language into the translated space. Let us follow a few examples to illustrate the above.

One of the popular notions used in contemporary discourse on popular culture, particularly audiovisualised culture, is the concept of the 'bible pauperum'. In the Middle Ages, the *Biblia Pauperum* was primarily a technique used by preachers to memorise homiletical content relating to the truths of faith by means of concrete exemplars.³² To this end, scenes drawn from the pages of the Gospels or the Old Testament were accompanied by rather figurative examples to help convey the theological content. In this way, a structure (outline) was developed that included a Christocentric representation with simultaneous reference to the Old Testament. In order to make the parallels more memorable, iconographic elements began to be placed alongside biblical passages, which over time gained more space on the pages of these

³⁰ Fritz Paepcke, "Rozumienie a przekład" [Understanding and Translation], trans. Grzegorz Sowiński, in *Współczesne teorie przekładu. Antologia*, 342.

³¹ Abdelkebir Khatibi, "Diglossia," in *Algeria in Others' Languages*. Cited by S. Ungar, "Pisanie językami". *Rozważania o dziele tłumaczonym (Writing in Tongues: Thoughts on the Work of Translation)*, trans. Agnieszka Pokojska, in *Niewspółmierność. Perspektywy nowoczesnej komparatystyki. Antologia* [Incommensurability: Perspectives of Modern Comparative Studies. Anthology], ed. Tomasz Bilczewski (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2010), 544.

³² Ryszard Knapieński, "Biblia Pauperum. Rzecz o dialogu słowa i obrazu" [Biblia Pauperum. The Dialogue of Word and Image], *Science*, no. 4 (2004): 133–164.

codices than the text itself. This popularity of illustrated codices meant that the concept of the *Biblia Pauperum* also came to refer to other iconic messages, for example paintings, stained glass, and illuminator art with non-biblical themes.

It seems that it is this somewhat looser translation of the phenomenon that has become the basis for explaining the contemporary tendency in popular culture to visualise content. The civilisational paradigm shift associated with the transition from print culture to image culture, brought about by the presence of cinema, television, computer and mobile screens, demanded a description of the phenomenon. The analogy between mediaeval and contemporary culture was noted quite quickly. Umberto Eco, in his essay *The New Middle Ages*, wrote that, as in the Middle Ages, the elite today uses a written text and an alphabetic mentality, while lower culture (popular or folk) operates with pictorial solutions.³³ In a similar sense, Monika Sznajderman uses the concept of the “bible pauperum” while describing the phenomena of audiovisual culture, video culture and pop culture, writing that “Wideo [to] obrazkowa i jednocześnie bliska oralności, współczesna a przecież zaskakująco archaiczna *Biblia pauperum* dzisiejszego człowieka”³⁴ [Video [is] a pictorial and at the same time close to orality, contemporary and yet surprisingly archaic *bible pauperum* of today’s man].

The mechanism of transferring meaning with a foreign term to a phenomenon from another time and attempting to identify and define a concept by means of another, distant term together with the entire cultural context, also works in the other direction. If an attempt is made to define contemporary cultural phenomena by means of the ‘bible pauperum’, the concept of the ‘mediaeval comic’ used in the mediaevalist narrative shows the opposite direction of action. Shaped at the end of the nineteenth century and experiencing the apogee of its popularity in the twentieth century, the comic strip, as a form of dual-coded expression combining image and word, became a way of describing mediaeval manuscripts, such as Etienne Harding’s Bible or the Canterbury Psalter. This translation of the phenomena of the mediaeval art of editing is brought to you by the French National Library, which in 2001 hosted an exhibition entitled. ‘La BD avant la BD’ (The comic *before the comic*).³⁵ The material on the exhibition’s website focused on discussing ex-

³³ Umberto Eco, “Nowe średniowiecze” [The New Middle Ages], trans. Piotr Salwa, in Umberto Eco, *Semiologia życia codziennego* (orig. *Semiologia quotidiana*) (Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1996), 96.

³⁴ Monika Sznajderman, *Współczesna Biblia Pauperum. Szkice o wideo i kulturze popularnej* [The Modern Pauperum Bible. Sketches on Video and Popular Culture] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 1998), 12.

³⁵ The exhibition was available at <http://expositions.bnf.fr/bdavbd/anglais/expo/recit/index.htm>. Nowadays, a reception of this, found on the National Museum website, can be

amples of mediaeval bicode manuscripts, using the notion of ‘comics’ and the framing shots typical of this media form, namely strips, frames and extradiegetic narrative. The pictorial narrative present in the manuscripts, due to its polymediality, is meant to resemble the structural framework of the comic medium popular in the last century – it is as much about the narrative arrangement of the content, unfolding in strips, as it is about the relationship of word and image in frames, whose coexistence is both a compositional and a sense-making element. It therefore does not concern mere illustration and the servile role of the iconosphere vis-à-vis the text, but rather the reciprocal determination of meanings, as is the case in comics.

One could speak of a similar translation strategy by referring to the reliance of the reflections of contemporary cultural studies on carnival metaphors. The carnival is used to explain the role of media culture as the main provider of entertainment. It is no coincidence that the cover of the Polish edition of the book *To Amuse Ourselves to Death* by the American philosopher and media critic Neil Postman features a reproduction of Francisco Goya’s painting *Funeral of a Sardine*. Reminiscent of mediaeval masquerades, the painting by the Romantic era painter depicts the tradition of carnival processions leading up to Lent. Like the Feast of Donkeys or the Fools’ Parade, it is accompanied by a mood of madness, chaos and degeneration. Postman thus relates the era of show-business and media entertainment to a perpetual carnival, available to the viewer around the clock.³⁶ As in the mediaeval procession, so on the screen, the reality depicted is an inversion of the social order, it is a time for putting on masks and colourful costumes that have nothing to do with reality. Anyway, the metaphor of carnivalisation used here appears extremely often as a commentary on contemporary phenomena. It is used to interpret the ludic dimension of popular culture in the light of the old (read: mediaeval) tradition of the “world in reverse” or precisely the carnival.³⁷ Examples could be multiplied.³⁸

found in a report by one online reader: *Magazyn Kultury Popularnej Esensja*, accessed January 13, 2024, <https://esensja.pl/komiks/publicystyka/tekst.html?id=19562>.

³⁶ Neil Postman, *Zabawić się na śmierć: dyskurs publiczny w epoce show-businessu*, trans. Lech Niedzielski (Warszawa: Muza, 2002), 125–144. Original: Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (London: Penguin Books, 1985).

³⁷ A review of such positions can be found in a number of collective studies, e.g. *Teoria karnewalizacji. Konteksty i interpretacje* [Carnivalisation Theory. Contexts and Interpretations], eds. Andrzej Stoff, and Anna Skubaczewska-Pniewska (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika 2000); *Ludyczny wymiar kultury* [The Ludic Dimension of Culture], eds. Jan Grad, and Hanna Mamzer (Poznań: Wydawnictwo UAM, 2004); monographic issue devoted to carnival *Polska Sztuka Ludowa. Konteksty*, no. 3–4 (2002).

³⁸ I wrote about this in Adam Regiewicz, “Komparatystyka i czytanie dawności. Medievalizm jako zjawisko translacyjne” [Comparatistics and the Reading of Antiquity. Medievalism as a Translational Phenomenon], *Rocznik komparatystyczny*, no. 7 (2016): 75–90.

The practice evoked here is therefore about seeking to understand, to situate a given phenomenon in the context of past experiences – culturally described, defined, though distant from the present. The translation technique used here intuitively seeks analogy or affinity, and therefore proximity, between the meaning structures of the past and the present, letting the contemporary reader of culture know that there is a clear correlation between the past and the present. The translation of past culture would thus consist in a process of incorporating it into contemporary space by means of language, using concepts that refer to familiar structures to explain new phenomena. Once again, then, the study of the past becomes a process of interpretation, and this is always subject to variables: it is part of an ongoing discourse.

Discourse

In his definition of mediaevalism, already quoted, John Simmons writes that the phenomenon of making the past present in the present is a kind of discourse, used to shape, contest and comment on other times. In the context of the reflections presented here, which could be called postmodern or neo-mediaevalist,³⁹ discourse seems to be one of the most important approaches. First and foremost, because discourse reveals the communicative positioning and orientation of the times from the perspective of which the past is commented on, situating it in a specific social and cultural context, in a social dialogue. Discourse thus is a story – the speech of a community that constitutes identity, that gives meaning to the collective.

Therefore, as Michel Foucault notes, discourse is an ideological speech in a broad sense. This is because every discourse is given a certain value, a moral measure. Discourse is total speech because it takes into account the various aspects of the individual and social situation of individuals and groups, a speech anchored historically and socially, and as such allows the individual to activate his critically commenting role.⁴⁰ The extremely popular thesis of the ‘new Middle Ages’, uttered several times over the last century by, among others, Nikolai Berdyaev⁴¹ and Umberto Eco,⁴² could be placed in this perspective.

³⁹ Postmodern mediaevalism is a kind of self-reflexive interpretation of how to reconstruct the Middle Ages in the present.

⁴⁰ Cf. Mieczysław Dąbrowski, *Komparatystyka dyskursu. Dyskurs komparatystyki* [Discourse Comparatistics. The Discourse of Comparatistics] (Warszawa: Dom Wydawniczy Elipsa, 2009), 19.

⁴¹ Mikołaj Berdyaev, *Nowe Średniowiecze. Los człowieka we współczesnym świecie* [The New Middle Ages. The Fate of Man in the Modern World], trans. Henryk Paprocki (Warszawa: Fundacja “Aletheia” 2003).

⁴² Umberto Eco, “The Return of the Middle Ages,” in Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality, Harcourt*, trans. William Weaver (San Diego–New York–London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986).

This concept is based on the conviction that there is an analogy to be drawn between unifying tendencies in contemporary culture – the current globalisation, understood as a process of dissemination of many (not necessarily coherent) patterns, behaviours, norms and values on a universal scale, creating an interconnected network covering all planes of life: existential and social, and expressed through mechanisms of economisation and technicalisation – and mediaeval universalism. This interpretation strongly evokes the conviction that the Middle Ages and the present share a civilisational model based on unification, behind which then stood Christianisation and today consumerism and globalisation.

The Soviet philosopher Berdyaev had expressed a similar thesis almost a century earlier, drawing attention to the very moment of crisis of values: then Roman and today humanist and materialist ones. He wrote that the transition to the new Middle Ages, as once the transition from the Roman Empire to the Middle Ages, is accompanied by the decay of old societies and the imperceptible emergence of new ones. The old, well-established, formed social and cultural cosmos is today being shattered by chaotic and barbaric forces. As then, a new world, expressed by spiritual needs, appears behind them. In the fourth and fifth centuries it was widespread Christianisation, in the twentieth century it was a new faith, which for the Soviet philosopher was to be communism. Berdyaev's approach is typical of the geopolitical discourse of the time (1930s).

Umberto Eco behaves in a similar way when, in analysing socio-political phenomena, he argues for parallels between the mediaeval rule of local feudal lords and the contemporary system of tensions between local authority and state administration. In his famous essay *The Return to the Middle Ages*, the Italian mediaevalist sees a number of parallels between mediaeval and modern rules of social and technical life. He speaks of a similar feeling of civilisational fear, of a sense of danger, of a convergence of cultural trends that try to combine popular (low) and high culture by means of iconicity (images), but also of a tendency to constantly update without caring for the original sources, which seems to be extremely evident in recent decades, especially in terms of new media and technology. Besides, for Eco, the latter (technology) is evidence of a *sense of the* constant reliving of the New Middle Ages. At one point he writes explicitly: "We are still living under the banner of mediaeval technology".⁴³

Both Berdyaev's and Eco's statements should be seen precisely as part of the discourse through which the present is commented on. The past, as presented by both scholars, is necessary insofar as it becomes for them a tool of

⁴³ Eco, *The Return of the Middle Ages*, 64–65.

cultural diagnosis. By means of the discourse used, certain contents of the past are redistributed, selected and at the same time controlled, indicating desirable and undesirable phenomena. Secondly, and seemingly more importantly, discourse is a kind of commentary that completes the places left unsaid in the primary text – in this case, the past. By reading the Middle Ages with their times, Berdyaev and Eco introduce a contemporary code into the image of the past, superimposing a contemporary language on the old speech.

The study of antiquity thus turns out to be a strictly comparatist activity, which I understand as a kind of thinking. The comparatist mechanism cuts itself off from ready-made solutions, elaborated models or closed objects.⁴⁴ When looking at the past, the strategies of translation or discourse adopted, as well as imagological research, indicate the lack of sharp boundaries that make the past and the present similar to the cultural bubbles Charles Bernheimer once referred to in his report.⁴⁵ Both the past, captured within certain boundaries and made accessible by selected cultural texts, and the present – nowadays so much discursivised – form a moving, fluid space of intersecting cultural (worldview, ideological) fixations. After all, both the cultural past under study and the researcher him/herself are immersed in symbolic orders, discourses, value systems, habitus and patterns [expressed] through their language.⁴⁶ Researching antiquity we are moving in the realms of interpretation, we superimpose our understanding on the stones and manuscripts left behind, trying to match their phenomenological presence with the state of knowledge we have – and knowledge, as we know, is always an expression of some kind of power, and thus remains political. As a result, every activity in *reception studies* is undertaken within the framework of imagology in the broadest sense – the study of the imaginaries that a community produces.

The other observation concerns the way in which this pastness reaches us. The metaphors of translation or discourse discussed above emphatically demonstrate that the construction of an image of the past is subject to the dictates of language. And whether it is the image that expresses itself through language or language that works for the culturally emerging imaginary, *reception studies* is largely based on rhetoric. Whether we are talking

⁴⁴ Tadeusz Sławek, *Żaglowiec, czyli przeciw swojskości. Wybór esejów* [The Sailing Ship or Against Familiarity. A Selection of Essays] (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2006), 171.

⁴⁵ Charles Bernheimer, *Wstęp. Lęki przed porównaniem (The Anxieties of Comparison)*, trans. Piotr Sobolczyk, in *Niewspółmierność. Perspektywy nowoczesnej komparatystyki. Antologia*, 129.

⁴⁶ Cf. Siegfried J. Schmidt, *Literaturoznawstwo jako projekt interdyscyplinarny* [Literary Studies as an Interdisciplinary Project], trans. Bogdan Balicki, *Teksty Drugie*, no. 4 (2010): 154.

about the 'Dark Middle Ages' or the 'New Middle Ages', depending on the worldview adopted at the time that influences the discourse surrounding the chosen antiquity, the reading itself is produced on the basis of the language employed. This, in turn, always has a Dictionary at its disposal that reflects the popular judgements or beliefs of the moment. What is not in the Dictionary does not exist in the discourse. What seems interesting in this perspective, therefore, is the way in which the language of research, the tools created through the metaphors used, allow us to read antiquity today.

All this makes it possible to locate the study of the reception of past culture in the space of cultural comparativism, which is not so much concerned with the grammar of similarity as with the elaboration of a *tertium comparationis*, which, by juxtaposing the past and the present, "bada sieć relacji, nie widząc i nie chcąc widzieć «początków» i «końców»"⁴⁷ [explores a network of relations, without seeing or wanting to see 'beginnings' and 'ends'].

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⁴⁷ Zbigniew Kadłubek, *Święta Medea. W stronę komparatystyki pozasłownej* [Sacred Medea. Towards a Non-literal Comparatistics] (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2010), 180.

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Medievalizm jako przykład *reception studies*

Abstrakt: Budowanie wypowiedzi na temat przeszłości jest w dużej mierze odtwarzaniem wyobrażenia o niej. Dawna kultura nie jest współcześnie dana inaczej jak poprzez relikw lub ślad, wytwarzany zaś dyskurs lub narracja są działaniem imagologicznym. Na przykładzie współczesnych kierunków badań mediewistycznych artykuł pokazuje trzy wyraźne tendencje w sposobie traktowania przeszłości – jako fantazmatu, tekstu tłumaczonego oraz elementu dyskursywnego. Wszystkie te mechanizmy wpisane są w komparatystykę kulturową, którą można rozumieć jako model „czytania” kultury dawnej przez kulturę współczesną. Medievalizm jest tu rozumiany jako reprezentacja ponadhistorycznego oraz transkulturowego badania porównawczego. Takie ujęcie pozwala dowiedzieć, że badanie recepcji jest w rzeczywistości działaniem w duchu komparatystyki kulturowej.

Słowa kluczowe: reception studies, średniowieczność, hermeneutyka śladu, imagologia, dyskurs.

Der Mediävalismus als Beispiel für die Rezeptionsforschung

Abstract: Die Konstruktion von Aussagen über die Vergangenheit ist zu einem großen Teil eine Rekonstruktion des Imaginären der Vergangenheit. Die vergangene Kultur wird den Zeitgenossen nur durch ein Relikt oder eine Spur vermittelt, während der Diskurs oder die Erzählung eine imagologische Tätigkeit ist. Am Beispiel zeitgenössischer Trends in der mediävalistischen Forschung zeigt der Artikel drei klare Tendenzen, wie die Vergangenheit als Phantasma, übersetzter Text und diskursives Element behandelt wird. All diese Mechanismen sind der Kulturkomparatistik eingeschrieben, der als ein Modell des „Lesens“ vergangener Kultur (durch) und (in) die zeitgenössische Kultur verstanden werden kann. Der Mediävalismus wird hier als Vertreter von überhistorischen und transkulturellen vergleichenden Studien verstanden. Mit einem solchen Ansatz lässt sich nachweisen, dass die Rezeptionsforschung tatsächlich eine Tätigkeit im Sinne der Kulturkomparatistik ist.

Schlüsselwörter: Rezeptionsforschung, Mediävalismus, Hermeneutik der Spur, Imagologie, Diskurs.