Towards A Theory Of Cultural Identity Filters

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

When you read a piece of literature, it stirs up all sorts of thoughts of a culture that produced the chain of words. Beyond your first impressions, there is the possibility of deeper understanding but it is incapable of manifesting and coming into action without the helping hands of experience, knowledge and intuition. We are well aware that cultures as complexes cannot be deciphered very easily. Due to the countless subtleties of the ways of living, the differences of seemingly universal elements and characteristics, each human culture is unique — a unique system. This very fact raises the question whether it is possible to outline the source culture[1] behind a work of art. Naturally, there is a more fundamental problem in cultural analysis, namely, whether it is possible to draw the entire picture of a culture by employing various types of investigation. This problem logically raises a long series of further questions to which the answers can only be given with the help of more fields of science, both theoretical and applied.

During the past few decades a need for more comprehensive analyses of cultures has emerged out of interdisciplinary research. Different fields of science began to co-operate in order to gain better understanding of aspects of being human, being a part of communities, and belonging to cultures. Cultural boundaries have long proved not to overlap one another with national borders, not with geographical ones either. Growing mobility and cultural blending also render the identification of individual cultures even more problematic. Globalization seems to be a double-edged sword that, on the one hand, shapes cultures by forcing them into an easily controllable framework, suppressing certain characteristics, and, on the other one, lends a helping hand in self-justification by providing each community with rights and opportunities to emphasize other particularities. Intercultural communication has also quickened up, thanks to the rapid technological development, mainly of the second half of the 20th century, resulting in faster changes in folkways, cultural relations, and instability of cultural structures. Due to the questions raised by the multiplying intercultural contacts, a holistic approach has been claimed for which can, by involving different fields of research, measure up to the complexity of cultural studies.

Mankind has been studied since the first spark of rational thinking appeared on the horizons of human understanding. Man's cognitive self-realisation (Cassirer 1953: 19) must have occurred within the evolutionary phase called syncretism which was characterized by the strong interdependency of activities and the equality of their functional significance. The organization of work, of social structure, the institutionalization of norms and values are made possible only through rational planning, which presupposes conscious evaluation of individual and group experiences, and also conscious observation. No sooner had human communities started to become hierarchically structured than some began to act as leaders by differentiating themselves from others. The habit of distinction must have come up in two directions in parallel: inwardly, separating members of the same community from one another, and outwardly,

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[1] The concept of source culture is fundamental to our study as it refers to the cultural context in which the artists produce artworks, the context that strictly shapes pieces of art. Illésfalvi (2008b : 3-4)

forming one of the first cultural universals, the duality of We and They.[2] Accordingly, various groups of people seemed to possess similar interests and capabilities. In countless cases, diverse human groups have evolved so different norm and value systems, hierarchies of roles and duties that what refers to normal everyday form of something in a society may be regarded as abnormality in another (Voigt 1972: 153); however, there are a limited number of fundamental principles (Benedict 2005) for developing institutions that maintain order within the framework of a community.

Previously listed characteristics are only a drop in the ocean in the comprehensive studies of cultures, therefore, for a sufficient amount of data, several fields of science must be involved in the research such as sociology, ethnology, folklore, economy, anthropology, literary criticism, history, philosophy, and so on. To put it in a nutshell, Man is so complex a being that his thorough examination claims multiple co-operation and holistic views.

(Not only) for an interdisciplinary type of approach, firstly, the subject matter must be unambiguously defined, the goals of study set, and the stock of analytical tools taken.

The way humans live is undoubtedly conscious, at least, to a certain extent. They not only experience environmental influence, and acquire knowledge through repeated sensations, but are capable of interpreting and systematizing incoming information, in a word, learning. For the present study, this feature of humanity proves to be of prime importance as it is a universal characteristic of Man, and fundamental to the development of cultures.

Humanity has evolved a dualistic picture of the world: 'we' and 'they' (Ivanov 1984: 48-66). The two sides of the world have been competing ever since. Although it is typical of the so-called modern cultures to drastically divide the world into *Man And Nature*, certain cultures cherish the idea of *Man In Nature* (Illésfalvi 2004: 7-19, 35-37). The major differences between cultures of any kind seem to be based on the idea of superiority.

The natural way of expressing one's ideas about and attitude towards others happens through the application of some kinds of communicative systems like languages, sign-languages, and non-verbal forms of communication such as gestures, body positions, frequently backed with the help of some parts of the surroundings, for example, a picture, a walking stick, a piece of stone, or a rainforest. Independently of whether it is a verbal or non-verbal form of expression employed within the communicative framework, the study of language is the best tool for accounting for every detail of information transfer. Communication itself is also a universal characteristic of cultures, having its roots in the very core of existence as there is not one element in the known universe, be it material or immaterial, that has never communicated with another.

Cultures have been appointed to be the subject matter, and they have also been depicted as complexes, however, for the time being, the most important aspect of cultures is that they can be examined as hierarchical systems of sign systems. Accordingly, the full description of a culture should unite a range of investigatory aspects. The goal of this study is to outline

[2] The binary oppositions are fundamental for the evolvement of worldviews. The aspects of dualities have frequently been discussed worldwide, for further information see Turner (1997 : 166-203), Douglas (1966 : 4, 7-30), Zumthor (1983 : 5), Gurevics (1974 : 12-13)

an approach to cultures that combines interdisciplinary viewpoints and analytical techniques in order to reveal characteristics of the culture that produced each piece or written art — an approach of cultural semiotics.[3]

CHAPTER 2: 'SKIRTING ROUND' THE SUBJECT MATTER

The interdisciplinary approach necessary for the exploration of source cultures has to be evolved within a reasonable framework, consisting of shared analytical techniques and joint terminology. Each aspect of the observation requires the appropriate set of concepts by which characteristics can be best accounted for. It is popular with multidisciplinary approaches to borrow terms from one another in order to be capable of categorising, distinguishing, or explaining features. Basically, the trend of terminological exchange proves to be acceptable if the results of the co-operation of different fields of science confirm their applicability. Borrowed notions normally fit in the new context by changing their own semantic field. A joint terminology which is, in more aspects, similar to a lingua franca: one of the systems is selected as primary texture and then elements of other systems are inserted for multiple reasons. As an example, one study may be based on linguistic aspects, employing the notions of theoretical and applied linguistics (already combined!), and examines the nature of verbs focussing on their compatibility with other syntactic elements. To be able to describe the possible number of verb transitions, linguistics borrows the notion of valency (Budai 1997a: 175-191, 1997b) from chemistry. Both uses are quantitative, and are not intended to explain more than this type of compatibility. However, not every borrowing may function so unequivocally, due to their high context-sensitiveness, for instance, the semantic field of Morse's code is widened by linguistics and other human sciences.

Our subject matter is culture. The concept of culture has been defined in several ways throughout the ages (Kroeber-Kluckhohn 1952); each definition was derived from attributes most necessary for the given scientific field. Even within individual fields, there were often decisive factors that forced scholars to include or exclude certain attributes in accordance with their research interests. A semiotic definition may be as follows: culture is a complex of interconnected sign systems, a complex system that has a given form, meaning, and is used in a specified context (Voigt 1990 : 16); in semiotic terms, it possesses syntactic, semantic and pragmatic aspects. Language is a system that is capable of expressing these aspects; consequently, it is a central element of culture, probably, the most important one, because it can be the meta-language of any other elements whereas they cannot play this kind of role. Other major areas to be observed as building blocks of culture may be the belief, norm and value systems of the community, the stock of myths, legends, stories and verbal artworks, other forms of art, housing, clothing, eating habits, society as an organisation, and the individual and group human activities. (Illésfalvi 2008b: 2-7)

[3] For types of holistic approaches of the kind read the famous story of Asdiwal analysed by Claude Lévi-Strauss in the second book of Structural Anthropology (1983 : 146-197). See also Voigt (1977, 2008), Voigt-Hoppál (2003)

All the mentioned blocks that build up culture are systems of signs in the semiotic sense, including the three Peircean types of signs: icons, indices and symbols. Culture can be understood as specified by its own sign systems (Voigt 1990: 19). These systems are tools of intra- and intercultural communication; the way a community lives and keeps order within its framework and its members express their attitude towards the world. It is very important to mention that human culture does not only communicate with humans but also with the non-human environs, both animate and inanimate creatures. Communication guides Man's way through the course of life on Earth, ensures his existence, and widens the horizons of learning by providing the opportunity to share experience.

In an overall type of analysis the listed elements or areas of culture should be observed from syntactic, semantic and pragmatic aspects equally, roles and functions of constituents be identified and evaluated in order to outline the culture as a whole. Obviously, it is necessary to involve various types of scientific approaches in the research, but it is also advisable to rely on results of modern cultural studies as they already include observations from different social sciences.

Another notion to be discussed is identity. The notion of identity and collocations such as 'personal identity', 'national identity', and 'cultural identity' are umbrella terms used through-out various fields of science. In social sciences, identity describes an individual's or groups' comprehension of themselves as discrete entities based on sameness or very close similarities. A semiotic definition should practically be based on sameness; the same way of creating, inter-preting and using signs makes up a semiotic identity among humans. What are the building blocks of identity? It seems reasonable to start out from the collocation 'cultural identity' as we are focussing on how far cultures can be traced back in verbal art. The concept of cultural identity is likely to refer to a stock of attributes of a group of people sharing the same attitude towards signs and sign systems. Similarly to Alan Dundes's definition of 'folk', a flexible and open definition seems best in the semiotic context, due to the fact that the connotations of the word 'culture' vary according to the contexts it is used in.

The significance of cultural studies is being incessantly increased by urging international affairs brought forth by present day globalizing tendencies. Human communities are fighting for public acceptance, for equal recognition and appreciation both within national boundaries and outside. This study is wished to contribute to their struggle by providing another approach to self-identification, a semiotic approach to culture.

The aim of our approach is to explore the source culture that produces artworks, more precisely, written pieces. The null hypothesis is that arts reflect and carry culture within them. Thus each piece of art can be regarded as a cultural identity filter, an entity that represents certain aspects of the culture of its creator. These filters are selective, subjective and do not present a complete picture of the culture, however, depending on form and content, and occa-sionally on performance, pieces of literature provide a significant amount of information for the scholars.

Literature is a mirror in a graphic (and sometimes in oral) form that is capable of mov-ing all our senses, thus perfectly representing the multidimensionality of the world. Literature follows the linearity of our thinking, which is often broken in the case of other art forms such as painting or sculpture that are able to present various planes of time and space in one frame.

Nevertheless, literature is also capable of displaying more of these planes in one written section, yet the consumption of literature remains linear as we cannot read more sections of a particular work at the same time. Man verbalises in the interpreting processes, which is a linear procedure, therefore the understanding of verbal arts is inevitably linear. Obviously, the consumption of other forms of art that may present multiple temporal and spatial planes at the same time is also linear due to the linearity of our understanding, but the settings may allow us to perceive the temporal and spatial multiplicity in some segments of images and figures.

The above facts raise the questions of multidimensionality and multimediality (Petőfi-Benkes 2002) which are crucial points in our research. Literature normally (although not always!) transmits a multimedial reality through one single medium (channel). According to our communication model, the information source is the culture which serves as substratum for literary works, from which the senders (authors, performers) select their subject matter (message) and send it through oral or written form to the receiver (information destination). In this sense the information source is not the same as the sender of a message but the pool of information to choose from.

The problem of dimensionality and mediality highlights one more significant factor to be observed closely, namely, the truth value of information obtainable from literary works (Illésfalvi 2008a : 2-3). The information included in a piece of writing or speech may contain characteristics of the source culture or a culture invented by the author. Descriptions of a culture, either from the point of a member of that culture or from that of an outsider, may contain invented features, or borrowed characteristics from another culture, but they definitely contain characteristics of the source culture, often unintentionally. The truth value of unintentionally involved characteristics is normally higher than of those intentionally involved. Both insiders and outsiders are subjective and selective enough to falsify their evaluation and distort their description of a culture; however, seemingly, a group member's utterance normally employs cultural models, scripts and reveals culture-specific characteristics, consequently our research must explore the underlying cultural patterns. The identifiable characteristics are general in the sense that they are commonly experienced; if not so, they are individual notices and thus may not be examples of cultural experience. An individual's experience of a culture cannot be the basis for cultural analyses except when there are enough samples of personal experience available. The truth value of information is always granted as soon as there is enough supportive evidence.

For a better understanding of works one definitely needs to be acquainted with the immediate background of the artist; otherwise it would be impossible to draw conclusions about the source culture. These data are allowed to vary from case to case as the necessary minimum of information depends on the analytical context. Another aspect of contextual research comes from the above mentioned principle of communication, namely, that nothing can stand in isolation. Neither words, nor artworks appear in isolation, that is, for everything there is a need for company, a form of surroundings that shapes meaning. The information derived from context may establish a specific knowledge by which the results of our observation may be refined. Refinement is necessary for the validation of our approach, and even more for better understanding of cultures.

As soon as contextuality becomes necessary, we get back to the questions of multidi-

mensionality and multimediality. Although it is not the problem known as the Butterfly Effect, yet everything seems to be interconnected, thus our research is bound to deal with the union of dimensions and media as they are presented through the media of literature, be it oral or written. Multimediality and multidimensionality gain their justification if we accept that all of them are perceived in a series of conceptualising processes, that is, everything in the world appears in our mind with the help of personal interpretations. As for multimediality, pure textual works must be distinguished from artworks combining more types of media because the latter types may be interpreted differently due to the complexity of their structure. However, as stated above, every form of art is perceived the same way on the deepest level, as it is, the conceptualising process is the end of every interpretative process.

Our interdisciplinary research is now well-established in the sense that the necessary principal aspects have been discussed. A semiotic approach to literature as a branch of cultural identity filters is then expected to join various fields of sciences with an understanding of the world as a multidimensional entity every single segment of which can only be examined with respect to, at least, its immediate surroundings, and the theory must deal with the deepest level of human understanding, with the way various cultures conceptualise and interpret experiences. Literature has been chosen as the most suitable medium of cultural transfer, connected to every sense, most perfectly mirroring our reality.

CHAPTER 3: THE 'CIF' THEORY

The theory of cultural identity filters is an approach designed for complex cultural analyses, with a flexible framework that allows its techniques to be applied to various kinds of observations. It is semiotic in character as it combines the three major branches: syntax, semantics and pragmatics, none of which can stand the proof in a complex analysis without the other two due to the very nature of their subject. According to possible research objectives, the types of analysis can be classified as follows:

- selective / holistic,

- exclusive / comparative,

- synchronic / diachronic.

The first opposition refers to a distinction between the narrow and wide choice of subject matter, whether one or more segments or characteristics of a culture are examined. The selective type normally means the case when only one or a limited number of phenomena are chosen to be observed, whereas in a holistic model the culture as a whole is the subject matter. Although, theoretically, it would be possible to explore the whole of a culture, in practice it is impossible because of the limits of our perception. No one possesses the knowledge of their culture as a whole; consequently, no one can present it in full details. The incomplete presentation is accompanied by the limited perception on the receiver's part which finally calls forth that the results can only be 'quasi-holistic'.

The following table shows the possible types of analyses:

TYPE OF ANALYSIS	SUBJECT MATTER	EXPLANATORY NOTES
1) Selective	a) One phenomenon of a culture is examined.	It is a thorough analysis.
	b) The same phenomenon of different cultures is examined.	A comparative type.
	c) More phenomena of one culture are examined.	Normally, related phenomena are advised to be chosen as subject matter; otherwise the examination may as well be pointless due to the lack of coherence.
	d) More phenomena of more cultures are examined.	A complex comparative type of analysis.
2) Holistic	a) A whole culture is examined.	To be precise, several phenomena are examined at once.
	b) Whole cultures are examined at the same time.	A comparative analysis of several phenomena.

As the table shows there are more options to choose from in order to meet the objectives of analysis. The first major distinction between types derives from the number of phenomena examined, and allows of a deeper understanding of one single phenomena or the whole of a culture (1/a, 1/c, 2/a). The second major distinction between types derives from the number of cultures examined (1/b, 1/d, 2/b), and allows us to compare and contrast more cultures. The third type of distinction offers a different viewpoint for analysis: in a synchronic type, we can either analyse one or more phenomena of one single culture, or find similarities and differences between more cultures, whereas in a diachronic type, one culture may be observed in a given temporal sequence, and cultural changes might be identified according to the results. A diachronic type is not quite useful for the analysis of more cultures at the same time, as there may not be any kind of connection between findings. It is always the objective that determines which type should be used.

For all these types of analysis there is an optimal sequence of methodological steps which is advised, although not obligatory, to follow. During the analysis, the reader should follow a so-called top-down approach, starting from the surface of the piece of work and ending up at the deepest layers. These steps are:

- preliminary data collection,

- 'first reading' – identification of characters, scenes, objects, events and the main theme or themes,

- 'second reading' – the exploration of intra- and intertextual connections, the explanation of tropes, symbols and the relations between characters, scenes, objects, events (in relation to the theme),

- drawing conclusion about the source culture.

The first step provides the reader with a basic knowledge about the author's background. This information is much enough to give a starting point and little enough not to interfere with our observations. Mostly, it is enough to know which culture the author is from so that we can attach our findings to a particular culture. As there are no isolated cultures with a considerable body of literature, it is not surprising if we find traces of cultural contacts and reference to 'others' in the texts.

The 'first reading'[4] opens a rough view on the work, its content and form in general, and, although it may not literally involve only one reading but normally more, the notion borrowed from the methodology of teaching still holds the position of the introducer. The first encounter with a text provides the reader with an overall picture of the main theme, the characters and objects, the setting, and primary or in-text relations. These first impressions serve as the basis for further observations, as the schemata[5] to which any subsequent information is attached.

It is the 'second reading' that widens the hole through which we can really enter the work, explore various layers of its meaning with the help of joint syntactic, semantic and pragmatic examinations, and ground the last step. This is the phase when the semiotic apparatus truly begins to work. Understandably, the three major branches of the semiotic approach do not divide within the analytical process except for cases where the objective requires so, that is, for example in a semantics-based study. Otherwise, the three branches are inseparable as each of them depends on the others. As soon as we combine all the three aspects and place them in a given context, we get the real meaning.

Based on the information collected during the preceding textual analysis, we can draw conclusions about the source culture. It does not normally happen in one run, but in more steps, depending on the length and complexity of the work, the intricacy of details and the amount of obtainable information. The information we gather should be first classified as part of the belief, norm or value system of the community, or of the stock of myths, legends, stories and verbal artworks, other forms of art, housing, clothing, eating habits, the society as an organisation, or the individual and group human activities. Our findings may fit in one or more classes and to find their right place in the order of things within the cultural framework we should repeatedly observe relations between them — this procedure requires more rereading of the text.

Naturally, the analysis of a single work is not an end in itself. So as to validate our findings we must carry out similar analyses on works from the same culture, advisedly, on pieces by the same author so that we can clarify his or her perception of the cultural context, and also on texts by other members of the same community in order to evade a single author's subjectivity.

These steps should be followed in order to become able to outline a source culture. The clarity of the picture depends on how much information we manage to retrieve from the texts, but it is vital to be consistent in assessing various phenomena so as not to falsify results. From this phase on we are free to choose from the types of further analysis introduced in the above table.

[4] First reading is a concept used in the literal sense in the teaching of reading comprehension skills.

[5] The term comes from psychology and is used to refer to the organisational units of our long term memory.

CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSION

According to experimental results, the theory is easily applicable to cultural studies in the educational context.[6] The reasons for application are that this type of analysis improves logical thinking, strengthens argumentative communication, and deepens cultural awareness. These aspects are very important in cultural education; not only for learners of foreign languages, but also for those interested in cultural studies and humanities as the need for the type of view-enhancing tasks and for exercises that provide opportunity for problem solving and reasoning is frequently expressed. Moreover, these practices can be adapted to school curricula.

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[6] Learners and teachers of the English language from Hungary, Rumania and Germany were asked to complete a guided poem analysis worksheet between October, 2008 and June, 2009, and the conclusions about the source culture show an approximately similar understanding and interpretation of the poem regardless of age, gender and education.

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