In Memory of Professor Wojciech Józef Burszta

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.11649/sn.2588>

Michał Rauszer

University of Warsaw

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4956-4256>

e-mail: mrauszer@gmail.com

Abstract

The text is dedicated to the memory of Professor Wojciech J. Burszta.

Keywords: Wojciech J. Burszta; cultural anthropology; cultural studies; *Sprawy Narodowościowe: Seria nowa*

Wojtek used to shorten the distance very quickly and switch to more familiar forms of address, hence I will be writing about him using his first name in my text. We had a tradition with Wojtek that when we could not watch a football match together, we exchanged text messages with our comments during the game. To this day, I have many such messages on my phone with comments like “but the goal”, “brilliant pass”, “well, it was offside!”. I found out that Wojtek died shortly after the match in which his favorite Manchester United defeated Southampton 9-0. He did not reply to the messages with my comments about that match.

This work was supported by the Polish Ministry of Education and Science.

No competing interests have been declared.

Publisher: Institute of Slavic Studies, Polish Academy of Sciences.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 PL License (creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/pl/), which permits redistribution, commercial and non-commercial, provided that the article is properly cited. © The Author 2021.

My entire story about Wojtek can actually be encapsulated in how we met. Towards the end of my studies in Cieszyn, as the chair of the Ethnology Student Society, I decided to organize a series of meetings with famous Polish anthropologists. I thought it would be a great event for students like us in the small town of Cieszyn. For several reasons, Wojtek was my first choice. In my first class at Silesia University I had been assigned the very first task to prepare. It was a presentation on a chapter from Wojtek's book *Antropologia Kultury: Tematy, teorie, interpretacje* [Cultural Anthropology: Topics, Theories, Interpretations], and the chapter was entitled *Kultura i kultury* [Culture and Cultures]. That was the moment when I met Wojtek, but I did not meet him in person yet.

Culture and Language

The book *Antropologia kultury* was, in a way, the culmination of the first period of Wojtek's work. At the end of the 1980s, changes began in Polish ethnology. Young researchers, including Wojtek, felt that the then model of practicing ethnography – consisting in the famous counting of cow tails and deliberations on the right direction of movement in a circle in folk dance – was in decline. These researchers, influenced by the linguistic shift taking place in American anthropology (the works of Ward Goodenought, James Clifford, Clifford Geertz, and others), but mainly by the works of the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, proposed a different view of culture. This was reflected in Wojtek's works, in which he problematized the relationship between language, culture, and reality.

Wojtek was then concerned with how language shapes the cultural reality in which we function. His first book in this field was *Język a kultura w myśli etnologicznej* [Language and Culture in Ethnological Thought], which is a published version of his doctoral dissertation. His subsequent works not only problematized the role of language in culture but also showed the role of language in anthropological research. The works that Wojtek wrote together with another Poznań-based ethnologist, Michał Buchowski, such as *Wymiary antropologicznego poznania kultury* [Dimensions of the Anthropological Cognition of Culture], and with anthropologist from Łódź Krzysztof Piątkowski, *O czym opowiada antropologiczna opowieść* [What an Anthropological Story is About], are considered milestones in Polish anthropology. They shook its very foundations. Thanks to these works, anthropologists in Poland were able to leave the nineteenth-century paradigm of description and move to the study of culture as certain forms and models of thinking. Also, a careful reader of these works could notice that the allegedly objective anthropological description is constructed in the research process as well.

These works culminated in the aforementioned textbook *Antropologia kultury*, where Wojtek not only recapitulates the changes that took place in anthropology under the influence of the American linguistic shift and French structuralism – he also shows that anthropologists study not only such antiquities as agricultural tools but they are interested in

everyday life that surrounds us all. As a result, anthropology and many related sciences made it clear that punk pogo has the same meaning for the dancers as the traditional *zbójnicki* dance has for Tatra highlanders. Thanks to Wojtek's works, we can try to reach this meaning as well.

Wojtek shortened the distance between people very quickly. At the aforementioned lecture in Cieszyn, when I met him in person, he immediately switched to first names and left out academic titles. He also started asking what I was doing, what interested me, and we ended up talking for a few hours. The most interesting thing about this conversation was that he was really interested in what I was doing, he listened attentively, he did not correct or lecture me. In his presence, a fourth-year ethnology student could feel like an equal partner in the conversation. Actually, I can say that we became friends from then on. Later, Wojtek not only became the supervisor of my doctorate, but simply a colleague. Whenever you talked with him over the phone and you did not see his gray hair, you could forget that there was a great age difference between us. Thanks to his non-traditional academic approach, Wojtek could talk freely about everything that was of value not only to me but also to everyone who came into contact with him. Whether it was rock music, crime fiction, kitschy cinema of the 1980s, sport, or whatever else – Wojtek always listened with interest.

This allowed him to see the importance of even seemingly trivial topics. At a time when Wojtek and Waldemar Kuligowski, anthropologist from Poznań, wrote the book *Dlaczego kościotrup nie wstaje: Ponowoczesne pejzaże kultury* [Why the Skeleton Does Not Ressurrect: The Postmodern Cultural Landscapes], and later, also together, *Sequel: Dalsze przygody kultury w globalnym świecie* [Sequel: The Next Adventures of Culture in a Global World], the opinion that phenomena of popular culture deserve the attention of researchers was not so common and obvious. These topics were rather neglected, treated with a pinch of salt – what were they in the face of such great questions for the humanities as what is the nature of the universe? or such objects of interest of anthropologists, sacred by tradition, as mythology, religion, rituals?

The Culture of Pop-Nationalism

Throughout his writing about culture, Wojtek was basically faithful to what he wrote in his early works: culture is everywhere, in everything one does, thinks, produces, since a person is created through their actions in culture. This means that every cultural phenomenon can be analyzed, there is no valuation here. From the perspective of literary value, pocket-sized, cheap literature may not be equal to great canonical works. It does, however, have some meaning and value for its readers, just as canon literature does for its respective audience. The question is: what is value? What does it matter? How does it affect thinking about the world? Wojtek posed such questions in *Świat jako więzienie kultury*:

Pomyślenia [The World as the Prison of Culture: Reflections] or in *Od mowy magicznej do szumów popkultury* [From Magical Speech to the Buzzes of Pop Culture]. In this way, his interest in issues of nation, national processes, and post-nationalism was born.

In the relatively recently published book *Kotwice pewności: Wojny kulturowe z popnacjonalizmem w tle* [Anchors of Certainty: Cultural Wars with Post-Nationalism in the Background] (2013), he reflected on the influence of pop culture, the postmodern supermarket of culture, on new nationalism. Here, the key issue that Wojtek pointed to is the importance of neoliberal globalization. It knocked people off their feet, shook the solid foundations on which they built their lives, forcing them into the lives of constant economic tension, resulting in the blurring or loss of meanings so far considered more or less stable. Wojtek convincingly showed that one reaction to this was the search for such “anchors of certainty” as new nationalism, which manifested itself in cultural wars as the pop-cultural re-actualization of national symbols and values. Besides research on the creation of a post-nationalist imaginary, Wojtek also supported and organized research on how the nation is taught in schools. The result was the book *Naród w szkole: Historia i nacjonalizm w polskiej edukacji szkolnej* [Nation at School: History and Nationalism in Polish Education], which shows in practice how these anchors of certainty are reproduced at school and how the importance of national symbolism, which is re-actualized by popular culture, influences the content of what is taught.

The Culture of Music, Literature, and Football

Wojtek, as a supervisor, associate, university colleague, never used compulsion, did not impose topics, methods of their interpretation, or methodology. Rather, he respected the choices of his students, sometimes learning with them. He only supervised the correctness of the conducted research. The only field in which he was ruthless was music. In this domain, he sometimes used all his anthropological knowledge to convince everyone to listen to his favorite psychedelic rock band, Yes. When nothing helped, he reached for the ultimate weapon: he took an unsuspecting victim to their concert. In this way, die-hard hip hop fans, former metalheads, and punks slowly crumbled. Even if they were not convinced by Yes, at least they listened to a few albums. And Wojtek was triumphant because the seed had been sown. Apart from Yes, he remained open in music, literature, cinema, and other types of entertainment. He once admitted that thanks to this openness he constantly learned something new, and if he had been left only in the shell of what is recognized, his brain would cease to function. Of course, Wojtek talked about it in a much more blunt manner and with his own sense of humor but the allegories and parables he used are not suitable for an academic journal.

His openness is well illustrated by the moment when so-called quality television appeared, with many excellent TV series. I remember that at the beginning Wojtek asked us what we watched and what we could recommend to him. Together with his wife Hania,

they quickly became masters in finding interesting TV series and we, his students, turned to him for recommendations. Thanks to this vitality, he not only watched or listened but most of all he tried to understand and research.

Reading detective stories or watching TV series was for him not only entertainment but also a kind of contact with an ethnographic source about the present day. He tried to include everything in his work. He analyzed these sources directly, as with the books about crime fiction *Krwawa setka: 100 najważniejszych powieści kryminalnych* [The Bloody Hundred: The 100 Most Important Crime Novels], written with Mariusz Czubaj, or *Kryminalna odyseja oraz inne szkice o czytaniu i pisaniu* [Crime Odyssey and Other Sketches on Reading and Writing]. Sometimes he included analyses of certain ethnographic phenomena, as was the case in the studies on Euro 2012 (*Stadion – Miasto – Kultura: EURO 2012 i przemiany kultury polskiej* [Stadium – City – Culture: EURO 2012 and the Changes of Polish Culture]). Sometimes he simply illustrated particular theses with the help of literature. The last book Wojtek published before his death was about Roger Dean: *Sferyczne fantazje w świecie Rogera Deana* [Spherical Fantasies in the World of Roger Dean], which he wrote together with anthropologist and poet Maria Fiderkiewicz. Dean was an icon of the counterculture; he was known, among other things, for his illustrations on the covers of the albums of Wojtek's favorite band, Yes.

Farewell

All of Wojtek's interests and activities intertwined and often one arose from another. At an early stage, Wojtek explored the importance of language and symbolic thinking for the formation of worlds in culture. Thanks to the problems posed in this area, he could perceive the importance of popular culture, sometimes even in its most vulgar version. A feature of postmodern popular culture is its intertextuality, but also the breakdown of human cognitive foundations, which comes with the accompanying neoliberal globalization. This would be the next stage of Wojtek's research: how a person finds familiar and liked sounds, and even melodies, in this noise and buzz of contemporary culture. Out of an interest in the meaning of cultural globalization, Wojtek switched to analyzing what the search for some permanent identity support means in all of this. In my opinion, these are the three most important nodal points in Wojtek's work. Apart from them, there are of course many threads that require clarification. These include literature, especially crime fiction, popular music, counterculture, jazz, football, and many others.

I have not written about all of Wojtek's books and works, and it is certainly not an exhaustive review, or one that his work would deserve. In this short text I intended to share some ideas about how Wojtek's writing can be approached, and some thoughts about him from my personal perspective. The reader will not find a reconstruction of his thoughts here. Instead, it is my farewell to Wojtek.

Pamięci Profesora Wojciecha Józefa Burszty

Abstrakt

Tekst poświęcony pamięci Profesora Wojciecha J. Burszty.

Słowa kluczowe: Wojciech J. Burszta; antropologia kultury; kulturoznawstwo; "Sprawy Narodowościowe. Seria nowa"

Citation

Rauszer, M. (2021). In memory of Professor Wojciech Józef Burszta. *Sprawy Narodowościowe: Seria nowa*, 2021(53), Article 2588. <https://doi.org/10.11649/sn.2588>