

The poetics of “chochlik”

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“In the cup a little devil”.

Adam Mickiewicz, *Twardowski’s wife*

“the market adorned with be-auty”

Miron Białoszewski, *Ballada od rymu*

[Un-rhymed ballad]

Contemporary literary studies, in a methodological research alliance with linguistics, closely examines such issues as entropy, potentiality, redundancy, and probability in texts of culture.

We can see it, for example, in Bogumiła Kaniewska and Krzysztof Skibski’s insightful analytical study published in the 26th issue of *Forum of Poetics*. Discussing Magdalena Tulli’s prose, both authors write about “a particular design of the world, which is determined by the choice of narrative.”¹

Every such “design of the world” portrays certain events, be it fictional or real. This is true not only for art, but also for the real world, whenever the broadly defined act of conveying information or communicating takes place.

One way or another, what all messages have in common is, on the one hand, that their meaning is semantically organized (and super-organized in the case of works of art,) and, on the other hand, that the shadow of entropy looms over them.

¹ See: Bogumiła Kaniewska, Krzysztof Skibski, “If things are to go on...” – potentiality and entropy in Magdalena Tulli’s early prose”, *Forum of Poetics* 26 (2021): 34.

We are talking about the entropic periphery of the message, behind which lies the zone of alternative meanings: the zone of indeterminacy, mystery, potentiality, accidentality, and ambiguity. In other words, it is the zone of communication risk, where the devil never sleeps.

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"Chochlik," that is the Polish folk demon of misprints and slips of the tongue, as an object of interdisciplinary studies, combining literary studies, linguistics, and cultural anthropology? Of course, and why not?

The passion for deciphering enigmatic codes and palimpsests that animates our lives has been inspiring scholars and artists for centuries. Science and art go hand in hand whenever it comes to understanding the incomprehensible, the mysterious, and the surprising – the hidden meanings of the secret code of culture, appealing in its mystery. And not only when it comes to words and images, but also, for example, when it comes to the social and cultural expansion of new media in the 20th century – a topic that became Marshall McLuhan's life-long passion.

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Joking aside, only a person with a truly unconventional and extremely sophisticated sense of humor could call his academic book *The Medium is the Massage*. What was this all about? What deeper meaning may be found in this juvenile prank? Especially considering that the book was after all published by a renowned New York publishing house more than half a century ago?

Medium – message. Message – massage ... A scholar like Marshall McLuhan is sometimes an artist and a poet; he can set words and concepts free. They are freed from everything that, as academic terms, they should express in a linguistically disciplined manner. They are liberated from their routine semantic limitations.

Liberated words and liberated images. Not only in surrealist art: in the works of Buñuel, Dali, Chagall, Magritte, and Cocteau. There is something more at play here: a creative approach to the absurd. Each time it is triggered by an unfortunate semantic slip, a mistake, a minor mishap which leads to unexpected consequences – a creative error that gives rise to profound, sensational discoveries.

And such discoveries are not only being made today. They were also made back in the 19th century when movies and film editing were born. Georges Méliès's camera jammed while he was filming traffic in the Place de l'Opera, and an omnibus was instantly transformed into a hearse when the film was developed.²

² Sergei Eisenstein, "Georges Méliès's Mistake", trans. Richard Taylor, in: Sergei Eisenstein, *Writings 1922-1934* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 258–260.

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Message > *massage*. It does not really make sense. What is it about? Pure nonsense. An unusual association. A strange association. Does *massage* have anything to do with communication? Apart from the fact that the two words sound similar, there is no connection between them. As unfortunate as it is bizarre, the pairing of the two semantically completely unrelated nouns seems to be nothing more than an absurd rhyming coincidence.

Or maybe it is an ordinary typographical error (the two words, after all, are similar), and instead of the word *message*, there suddenly appears – quite ridiculous in this context – the word *massage*? I do not think so. It is not your ordinary typo.

Such extraordinary incidents have fascinated scholars and artists for centuries. The scientific metaphor and the artistic metaphor as a mistake? Not every type of mistake, however, only the one which leads to consequences – the one which turns the meaning of a given word or expression on its head – a bizarre mistake.

In this particular case we are dealing with a truly horrendous mistake. Fortunately, it was creatively tamed and capitalized on by the author. What does one have to do with the other? The word “medium” absurdly combined with the word “massage.” Freud would be interested in studying such a mistake. Perhaps he is not the only one?

A metaphor, a metaphorical epithet, a metaphorical comparison, catachresis as an act of imagination – an associative error with surprisingly significant cognitive and communicative consequences? An error that challenges routine meanings and disrupts logic – provided that it is treated creatively – may allow one to discover something unusual, something creative.

The poetics of Marshall McLuhan’s texts, rather eccentric in the way he expressed his thoughts, shows that the author enjoyed playing with language. He did not comment on this subject explicitly in his writings. However, the very title of one of his books, *The Medium is the Massage*,³ suggests that he was interested in the question of the “creative error.”

The *salto mortale* which McLuhan performed in the title of his book is a truly risky, crazy, and excessive stylistic trick, which gains momentum from the ingeniously used figure of association called catachresis.

McLuhan’s intriguing title suggest that “chochlik,” the demon of misprints and slips of the tongue, must have been involved. Indeed, in Polish, an error and a little folk demon are both called “chochlik.” And I do not refer to any error but a special kind of mistake which, contrary to the author’s intentions, invades the message and gives rise to unexpected new meanings.

³ Marshall McLuhan, Quentin Fiore, coordinated by Jerome Agel, *The Medium is the Massage* (New York, Bantam Books, 1967).

Communication incidents which involve "chochliks" are usually perceived as accidents. And "chochlik" is a magical creature. It is a malicious and mischievous trickster. It is invisible and it is responsible for surprising errors which are suddenly noticed in communication.

In *The Medium is the Massage*, the error is a result of the author playing with language. As in the Latin maxim *per aspera ad astra*, in which, let us note, our imagination is stimulated by the abyssal distance between the semantic fields of both nouns which, what is important, sound similar.

Message/massage. What massage? At first, one thinks that this association, this pun, is a mistake; there must a typo in the title of McLuhan's book, and no one has noticed or corrected this typographical error.

Is "chochlik" to blame? Someone will ask: what "chochlik"? What demon? What is it? We do not know much about these creatures. Let us therefore examine the etymology of this Polish word.⁴ First of all, "chochlik" is a close relative of "chochoł" (a straw wrap which, according to Polish folk legends, was endowed with magical powers). Secondly, although this word seems to have a respectable and long history in the Polish language and a *par excellence* literary provenance, only the latter is true. It turns out that it was elevated to literary status and employed for the first time, and *nota bene* borrowed from the Belarusian language (where "chochlik" literally means a young "shoot" of a plant or tree), by Juliusz Słowacki.⁵

Thirdly and finally, this mischievous creature (imp, goblin, hobgoblin, gnome, "the demon of misprints;" in German *drückfehlerteufel*), although invisible, has control over us. Depending on how much it is able to do, it likes to mix up people's plans and get its own way. In the end, it always wins.

In Polish, but also in other languages, such as German, the word "chochlik" is often connected with printing errors. It is recorded in the history of language. But this history is in fact more complicated. "Chochliks" do not make all incidental mistakes. Misdeeds they commit, confusing the communicating parties, are much more perverse, abnormal, and sophisticated.

"Chochlik" has been aspiring to the honorable title of a true poet at least since the times of the futurist Velimir Khlebnikov. As a rule, this poet did not correct typographical errors in his texts, recognizing their poetic potential.

By the way, in German and in English such typos are referred to by means of a descriptive expression. Unlike in Russian, in which there is a word *oshibka*. A creature which acts in the human world is playfully and tellingly called in Russian *besionok*, or a little devil.

⁴ See: Aleksander Brückner, *Słownik etymologiczny języka polskiego* [Etymological dictionary of the Polish language] (Krakow: Krakowska Spółka Wydawnicza, 1927), entry "chochoł", 181.

⁵ "Chochlik" is also part of the history of Polish architecture. In 1908, in the courtyard of the property at Sienkiewicza 17 in Zakopane, a small, quaint villa called "Chochlik" was built; it was designed by Stanisław Witkiewicz and Teodor Axentowicz.

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What is the difference between “chochlik” and a simple, trivial typo? Well, one fundamental thing plays a role here: the resulting confusion. It can be said that “chochlik” is a truly subversive typo. The prosaic typo is a mere error with no consequences.

It is different with “chochlik.” “Chochlik” means something. It interferes in and distorts the message, expressing something completely different. Every time it interferes in the message, the meaning changes.

It is a secret and secretive being; it is a magical creature – it maliciously wishes to wreak havoc. This demon of chaos imperceptibly meddles in the work of the typesetter, the typist, or the linotypist from behind their back; it creates confusion in something that was supposed to be perfect.

Does it rearrange letters? Yes, it is known for that, but not only that. It also rearranges syllables, words, phrases.⁶ Therefore, it should not be reduced to merely an error in print.

We find such mistakes also outside the universe of the printed word. Like a jack-in-the-box, it also pops out of the box in the iconosphere and the audiosphere, whenever there is an unexpected, unintentional, surprising distortion of the original broadcast. I will come back to this point later.

For the time being, let me clearly state that we do not find such mistakes only in print. Apart from writing and print, the same distortive mechanism operates in the case of images. As well as in-between words and images – in all kinds of textual-verbal-iconic combinations, such as cartoons, comics, and memes. As for the name itself...

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By its nature, it is tiny and imperceptible. Although it can lead to confusion and sometimes make a huge mess, we do not call it “chochol.” Instead, we use the diminutive form “chochlik,” which can be seen as an intentional act of magical taming.

The inconspicuous “chochlik” acts locally – it may be found in the microstructure of the text. Called into existence and residing in our imagination as something invisible, but spectrally present, it intends – this is its secret strategy – to remain insignificant, inconspicuous, and thus almost imperceptible *in statu nascendi*.

⁶ I will never forget Stanisław Barańczak’s puzzled face when he bought and opened a new issue of “Nurt.” To his dismay, his essay, originally entitled “O interpunkcji dziennikarskiej” [Punctuation in journalism], was titled “O interpretacji dziennikarskiej” [Interpretation in journalism].

I have already mentioned "chochliks" in the visual arts, for example, in photomontages or the process of retouching. Nearly one hundred years ago, Stalin used retouching to create his version of the historical memory of the revolution. He ordered Soviet experts to remove the image of his bitter enemy Leon Trotsky from all official photographs of Lenin.

In the artistic photomontage, "chochlik" plays an extremely important causative role. It can be said that it lies at its heart. It transforms the chaos of odd elements into a coherent system – the higher order of meaning designed by the artist. In the compositional super-organization of the photomontage, every element is a "chochlik." Rodchenko, Heartfield, Berman, Szczuka, Podsadecki and other masters of collage and photomontage made it the *spiritus movens* of all their semantic operations.

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Indeed, "chochliks" may be found not only in the logosphere but also in the iconosphere (all kinds of images) as well as the audiosphere (i.e., audio images). Thus, let us ask about the basic property of the poetics of "chochlik."

It all boils down to its causative function in the process of communication. "Chochliks" are usually to blame for communication errors and breakdowns. They distort the message. Whenever they are noticed, they confuse everyone involved in the act of communication.

Not just because no one has noticed them before. Also, and perhaps above all, because a slight defect, a minimal shift, a damage, or a distortion, unexpected as it may be, produces significant semantic effects. A local glitch that appears out of nowhere suddenly and completely distorts the overall meaning of the message.

To illustrate this with an example, I will refer to a real event involving an anarchic "chochlik" which took place in the summer of 1968 in downtown Poznań, in the dark post-March era of political turmoil. The 5th Congress of the Polish United Workers' Party was fast approaching. Everything had to be in order. Propaganda experts, as usual, were hard at work, doing their best.

In the Stare Miasto district, along the very busy Podgórna Street (at that time Walki Młodych), big signs on wooden poles, letter by letter, were stuck into a lawn. Every letter was painted on a separate plate. Together, they read: BUILDERS COLLECTIVELY SUPPORT THE RESOLUTIONS OF THE 5TH CONGRESS OF THE PARTY. The word "builders" referred to the nearby construction company.

Just your normal communist slogan. A bit stiff, as you can see and hear. One day an autumn storm came over the city; the wind blew harder than usual, and a strong gust of wind knocked over some of the letters. Which letters? The letters p,o,r, and t in the word SUPPORT. Poor things fell on the grass, but so much more was destroyed in that moment. There was no end to the joy of the more observant passers-by.

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“Chochlik” introduces minor changes into the text, but they are inversely proportional to the meaning of the whole. The resonance between the two gives it the exposed status of a surprising incident that it silently triggers.

Its *specialité de la maison* are not gross errors committed on a monstrously large scale, but punctual, minor mistakes, painful as a bite of an insect – they are small, almost painfully amusing, distortions. The difference between “chochlik” and a simple mistake is that the former is never a simple mistake, for example a trivial typo. The disruptions with which this little demon surprises us suddenly take on an insidious, anarchistic, meaning of their own.

Let me also comment on the attempts to use the energy it releases in a controlled way. “Chochlik” is used in various ingenious ways in the arts. These include, for example, the stream-of-consciousness technique, different forms of non-verbal language, aleatoric music, Dadaist and surrealist experiments, innuendos, the so-called “old wives’ tales,” automatic writing (*écriture automatique*), the artist’s signature on portraits painted by Witkacy (especially those created under the influence of drugs or alcohol), and the use of accidents in the performing arts, etc.

It is this unintentional semantic excess and the creation of new meanings that distinguishes “chochlik” from a mere typo. The typo is, so to speak, a “neutral” textual incident. Neutral in the sense that it only “produces” the error itself; “chochlik,” on the other hand, unexpectedly creates new subversive meanings.

It is true that we most often find it in writing or in print, but not only. We can also find it elsewhere. Whenever this little demon makes itself known, it turns into a cheeky usurper – it turns out to be a feisty, defiant, malicious trickster. It changes the author’s intent and introduces chaos into the communication process, turning it on its head. As a result, it makes us function in a permanent state of danger even when it does not appear. Why is that?

Acting with absolute impunity in the network of reality, it reminds one of a performance artist. Surrealistically innocent, each time it appears, it surprises and excites everyone and everything around it, putting parentheses or meaningful quotation marks around them. It is not limited to words only, but it must necessarily introduce an element of chaos into the existing order – it introduces anarchy into what seems to be permanent and definitive.

Carnivalization is an inalienable functional feature of “chochlik’s” genetic code. This carnivalesque (in Bakhtin’s understanding) aspect of “chochlik,” insofar as it subverts and distorts not so much the established order of the world as the imposed order of its textual (*ergo* symbolic) models, effectively undermines and ridicules everything.

Not only natural language falls victim to it. The social reality, with its various messages, is also the target. Especially reality that is controlled, often by force, where people are given orders. Such reality aspires to the status of a closed and coherent text.

When, in the summer of 1982 during martial law in Poland, dwarfs (distant cousins of little demons and "chochliks") appeared on the walls of different buildings in Wrocław, and soon in other Polish cities (they were painted by the Orange Alternative led by "Major" Waldemar Fydrych), it was a sensation that soon led to an important change – "chochlik(s)" gained new-found fame and importance. The innocent artist mocked and ridiculed the dangerous opponent, beating it at its own game.

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There's more. The humorous and playful version of "chochlik" has its stony-faced counterpart – a grim, dark, and serious "chochlik." Seriously? Yes, indeed.

This specter, this threat posed by an unintentional mistake which nevertheless leads to disastrous consequences (let us recall here the nightmare of the proofreader, Aleksei's mother, in Andrei Tarkovsky's *Mirror*, who wakes up in mortal terror), is so important that it should be discussed in greater detail.

I shall draw on cultural anthropology and information theory at this point. Considered from this perspective, "chochlik" – as a magical creature that is a product of human imagination – becomes an elusively dangerous image equipped with collective memory. What is it an image of? What does this abstract entity personify?

Is it abstract? Or maybe, on the contrary, it is very concrete. Well, both the serious and the playful "chochlik" are special, insofar as, although invisible, they make their presence known and influence the process of communication. As products of human imagination, essentially virtual, they turn out to be painfully real when we consider the damage they cause.

This intruder embodies entropy which invades the ordered microcosm created by people who want to formulate and convey the message. Because of "chochlik," this ordered microcosm – this structured logical text which we aspire to create – suddenly collapses like a house of cards.

The supposedly coherent "design of the world" falls apart against our will, even though it was supposed to protect us and free us from the unwanted, threatening, and involuntary disturbance in the communication process. The message in a specific language (be it verbal, iconic, audible, etc.), which makes communication possible in a given cultural system, is destroyed from the inside.

Such a frivolous interference leads to profound consequences. "Chochlik" may be annoying, but apart from extreme cases, it does not pretend to be something dangerous, something demonic. Due to its disposition and the role it plays in our lives, it is playfully malicious and perverse. It is a joker, a trickster like no other. It loves pranks. We know and accept that.

Exposed to its antics, we do everything in our power to prevent them. We know from experience that it can make its presence known at any moment. We should not assume that it has disappeared forever if it is not to be found at any given moment. As an embodiment of entropy, it can appear at any moment.

We know from experience that the risks associated with its antics are real. We try to minimize them, but we cannot completely rule them out. As an actor existing *in potentiam* in the multimedia semiosphere, “chochlik” may be invisible but he is nevertheless constantly present in our lives.

If we choose to anthropomorphize and magically personalize “chochlik,” we also accept the otherwise unpleasant fact that despite all our efforts we, humans, with our imperfections, are all fallible. So much for the observations of the cultural anthropologist in this respect.

The linguist, in turn, would probably add that the actions of “chochlik” do not exist in the rules of the language system (*langue*) but appear incidentally and asystemically in a given message (*parole*). “Chochlik” only makes its presence known in *parole* and disturbs its internal order. Which does not mean that it exists outside the language system as such.

“Chochlik,” in order to make itself known, needs the rules of the language system to exist. On the one hand, it follows them; on the other hand, it violates them (even though it refers to them). Language as a set of relations is a necessary frame of reference for it. Thanks to it, it becomes noticeable as an error, a surprising excess that occurred in the process of communication.

Unexpected results. We often call such errors “slips of the tongue.” There are countless anecdotes about slips of the tongue on the radio, television, stage, etc. One time George Bush thus described his working relationship with Ronald Reagan: “We’ve had triumphs. Made some mistakes. We’ve had some sex . . . uh . . . setbacks.”

This example shows the act of communication has its acoustic counterpart in the form of a mishearing (it is, as if, the opposite of a slip of the tongue). “Chochliks” can work their magic in and through sounds, creating hilarious errors based on rhyme, everyday expressions, phrases etc.

Either way, playful and ingenious, “chochlik” pokes fun at the idea of striving for absolute perfection. It teaches us that, regardless of our efforts and intentions, there is such a thing as chaos in the world.

It is therefore the embodiment of entropy, the harbinger of chaos, a visible manifestation of decay. It distorts and destroys the perfect structure of the message “from the inside.” Once “chochlik” interferes in the message, the message turns on its head; it contradicts itself. It becomes disinformation.

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“Chochlik” teaches us humility. It makes us aware not only of the possibility, but also of the inevitability, of error, which may appear in what we would like to make perfect and permanent. It makes the cultural anthropologist study how man approaches his work. It also makes him reflect on something more, namely the fragility of all products of culture, both material and symbolic, insofar as they may fall victim to entropy at any time.

Where did it come from? The social psychologist would probably say that it came from transference. Whenever an error occurs unexpectedly, people do not necessarily blame an unspecified external factor – an almost metaphysical entity that exists independently of them.

Something else is at stake here. When we blame "chochlik," when we blame the dark forces, we want to justify a mistake by anthropomorphizing it. Thus, it becomes part of culture.

Why do we do this? It seems that we are trying to regain control by turning the unpredictable into the predictable (at least to some extent). The mischievous "chochlik," who is part of our collective imagination, becomes someone familiar, someone tamed: a domesticated tenant in a highly imperfect reality in which we exist together.

"Speak of the devil," "the devil never sleeps," "a handsome devil," and "the luck of the devil." Compared to "chochlik," there are much more powerful dark powers at play here. "Chochlik," however, is not a devil but a trickster. It does not destroy man using infernal powers but, as a malicious spirit, mocks our efforts to finally make something (be it a text, an image, an artifact, a project, an action) perfect and complete. Hard as we may try, whatever we create will never be free from imperfections.

In itself, it poses a real challenge to the principles of praxeology. A true praxeologist will categorically deny its existence. "Chochlik"? Of course not! What is it? We are rational human beings and we must stay that way; let's all be rational. There are no "chochliks" in the world. We, humans, make mistakes, and we are responsible for them – not some "chochliks."

Wait a minute... Or maybe "chochlik" does exist, since – surprised by the inexplicable error – we are quick to blame it for our mistake. The collective imagination rooted in language and culture, which once gave rise to it, justifies (let us add: to some extent) the immanent imperfection of the planned result.

"Chochlik" does exist. It has been present in our lives for generations as an archetype – as a magical creature, as a personification of entropy. It was brought into existence by human imagination and the need to personalize the incomprehensible. It is as much an elusive virtual phantom as it is a causative force. It's right next to us, even though it's not there. It is truly incomprehensible how this can be, we ask ourselves. The near-supernatural status we assign to it implicitly translates into the inexplicable.

The cognitive scientist and the neurophysiologist would say that all this takes place in the human mind: in the parietal and temporal lobes of the left hemisphere of the brain. The latest research indicates that the right hemisphere also plays a role in this process. Everything is closely related to praxis – whenever we try our utmost to prevent "chochlik" from interfering.

This symbolic entity exists so that we do not blame ourselves. It is an "external" force which we can blame for our errors. We don't make them. The little demon is to blame. It is a force that exists in our thoughts and imaginations so that we can laugh at the belief in the absolute perfection – our failed attempts and efforts to avoid errors.

Once we blame “chochlik” for something, once we bring it into existence, it becomes an actor in the spectacle of our shortcomings. It was no accident that Sigmund Freud spoke of “slips”. The term *eine fehlerhafte Aktion*, which he often used, does not refer to “chochlik.” However, it can also be applied to its countless antics and pranks. Alas, there is one fundamental difference – we have not provoked or made those mistakes. On the contrary, they were meant to happen: they are entropic “mistakes.”

In both cases, we are dealing with uncontrolled excess – an alien factor intervenes and it confuses the meanings and disturbs the process of communication, also insofar as it creates its own meanings.

Whenever we happen to witness such an interference in the communication process, we realize how important redundancy is. Redundancy protects the intended and programmed (*resp.* correct) meanings, safeguarding against misreading and/or misunderstanding the message.⁷

And a clank. “The devil!” said he,
“Well, my friend, why have you come?”

Invading the text and demolishing it, “chochlik” turns on its head both the message and the reality in which it functions. In any case, the message is a conventional “design of the world;” it is an agreement between the communicating parties. It may be fraught with risk at times:

In the cup a little devil.

Mickiewicz’s ballad *Twardowski’s Wife*, unparalleled in its simplicity, presents in and through the language of poetry the deep connections and dependencies between information (the pact) and entropy (the effects of signing it). As a result of an unexpected interference, the thing that was supposed to keep the pact made with the devil in check suddenly disintegrates, and its literal meaning falls deeper and deeper into the abyss of the unexpected.

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Thus, the presence of “chochliks” in the universe of human existence has been significantly expanded. We started from their, so to speak, standard version. Then came the poetic version, and finally we discussed something that extends beyond the limits of both a mere slip of the tongue and an artistic experiment.

Of course, there is a fundamental difference between meaning-making in artistic texts and non-artistic texts, as postulated by semioticians of cultural texts. And we should not focus

⁷ See: Agnieszka Kula’s brilliant study *Redundancja w mediach. Studium pragmatolingwistyczne* [Redundancy in the media: A pragmatolinguistic study] (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, 2017).

solely on the former. If something may be defined as a text of culture, we should examine it as well.

The individual and the collective desire to bring order to both personal and social life is repeatedly challenged by chaos – and we try to get rid of it at every step. More broadly, this desire pertains not only to art but also to non-scientific and non-artistic texts.

While we tend to believe that all human creations and works which may be categorized as texts of culture, or which aspire to such a name, are rational and logical in one way or another (that is, they have been rationally conceived in one way or another), “chochlik” and its actions are not.

Living right next to us, as the shadow of our Sisyphean efforts to stop entropy from increasing, “chochlik” unceremoniously mocks all human endeavors. It does not care that we want to communicate in a coherent and communicative way.

Is “chochlik,” then, a figure of absurdity? Does it represent a secret conspiracy of fate – a scandalous offence against reason? But if it is an offence, then who committed it? Exactly. Instead of blaming ourselves, we blame the forces beyond our control. “Chochlik,” not us, is responsible for what happened – against our will. Therefore, pointing to it and blaming it for our human errors is usually accompanied by a helpless shrug of the shoulders.

I have already mentioned that we do not only find “chochliks” in print but also in speech – as slips of the tongue. George W. Bush once said “our enemies are innovative and resourceful, and so are we. They never stop thinking about new ways to harm our country and our people, and neither do we.” He later corrected himself, but it was too late.

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Marshall McLuhan, as we probably all know and as his texts demonstrate, loved charades, language games, puns, etc. He would probably excel in a game of innuendos. The absurd phrase *the medium is the massage* reads like a linguistic joke, almost like a deliberate slip of the tongue.

The essentially catachretic metaphor that is thus created owes more to the fact that the words message/massage sound similar than to the fact that there might be a logical connection between the two – it would be difficult to come up with a sensible semantic explanation of the phrase *the medium is the massage*.

We can draw some generalizations at this point but only on one condition: that we do not treat the message/massage mix-up as a one-off incident but rather – within the limits offered by artistic license – as a deliberate feature of poetics. And I mean the poetics of the open work – open to such an extent that it will transform the unpredictable into the predictable and the surprising into the deliberate.⁸

⁸ Umberto Eco, “Openness, information, communication”, and “Chance and plot: Television and aesthetics”, in: Umberto Eco, *The open work*, trans. Anna Cancogni (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).

McLuhan was quick to recognize, especially in relation to the media, this complex and multi-faceted semantic relationship between the *what* of the message and the *how* of the message. The *how* is closely related to the manner and the properties of the *what*. In short, we should focus on the goal (that is the intended deeper meaning) of the message/message mix-up.

It seems that this is what the intellectually provocative and erroneous title *The Medium is the Massage* aspired to. Was the error made by “chochlik”? Yes and no. The author made it. He mischievously tried to summon magical powers. And he was creative and bold enough to try to tame and control the element of language.

In the electronic age, the medium can be anything, and it can also be a “massage.” What at first makes no sense actually signifies. The word *message*, used in the context of McLuhan’s reflection on the mass media, is on some metaphorical level similar to the word *massage*. The two words sound similar but they also carry other meanings.

The statement *the medium is the massage* is not absurd at all. The media are indeed used to “massage” the general public. And if they are not, if they only inform and try to remain independent, the government cannot use them for this purpose. And thus they pose a potential threat to those in power.

In one of the most recent Polish hack-and-leak scandals, one of the Polish Prime Minister’s emails to one of his subordinates was made public. It read: “You have to massage our public opinion and prepare it for the fact that some changes must take place. Or even, using marketing language, you must create such a need.” The Polish P.M. supposedly said this in 2019, after winning the elections, in connection with the intended takeover of the free media (that is the media that were critical of the government).

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And so, we finally arrive at the extended understanding of the concept “text of culture.” A text of culture is not only a work of art but also everything beyond – any and all products of human minds and hands.

A poem, a novella, a novel, a movie. And so many other things. The constitution, a parliamentary resolution, a ministerial ordinance, a building, decor, a court judgment, a highway code, an opinion, an instruction manual, a lesson in school, an academic lecture, a spectacle, a concert, a dance party, a football match, all other sporting events, a park, a calendar, an inventory, an obituary, a wedding ceremony, a recipe, a philosophical dissertation, a game of solitaire, a horoscope, etc., are all, broadly speaking, texts of culture.

All signifying human actions, be it individual or collective, are also texts of culture, including a telephone conversation, a letter, a text message, an MMS, a meme, an email, a dream, small and big ideas, news and fake news, political games, diplomacy, forms of government, etc.

Plato was critical of the world designed by poets. I wonder how he would feel about the idea that the state is a text. It is essentially a text that combines the past, the present, and the future – it is a macrotext of the culture of social coexistence and systemic organization. And since the state is our collective, multi-authored text, we should do everything we can to neutralize a deadly virus that poses a great threat to citizens, whenever it appears.

It goes without saying that words and images play an important role in these processes as integral components and carriers of social practices. Democracies, unfortunately, are still not very effective, and totalitarian regimes teach us that the meaning of words (and images) and the manner in which they are used is a very serious matter.

If "chochlik" appears under such circumstances, it is not just a joke or an innocent prank made on April Fool's Day. As a tool of manipulation, it becomes an extremely serious joke – a joke with deadly consequences.

We know from other people's and from our own experience that it can be very harmful. Considering the damage it causes, it should be treated seriously. Although it is very often used to justify one's negligence and mistakes, in fact it does not justify them in any way.

Apart from the above, there is another sinister kind of "chochlik." A historical joke that is deadly serious. It is as dangerous as it is unpredictable. It should be remembered that not all cultural products are rational – there are limits to this claim.

On the one hand, any cultural text is a symbolic entity. On the other hand, in order to signify, it draws on the real. However, it does not make it a reality in the strict sense of the word. One must never be confused with the other. Nominalism, whenever it becomes a doctrine imposed on the practice of social life, can be extremely costly. We should never confuse the products of language with reality. And this reflection does not only hold true for art, nor is it purely academic.

A few decades ago, one of the most visionary filmmakers in history made one of the most harrowing comments ever made about the Anthropocene. In an unforgettable scene in *Apocalypse Now* in which American helicopters attack a Vietnamese village to the sound of Richard Wagner's "Ride of the Valkyries," Francis Coppola showed the madness of war and the frenzy of destruction – made possible thanks to ultra-modern technology.

As long as something is a function of culture and civilization, it is also a text of culture. However, barbarism that annihilates it, in all its forms, is definitely not a text of culture. Man is not only a creative being. In the name of "higher culture," he can also methodically destroy and annihilate everything that exists – both with and without his participation.

Nero, who probably considered himself the greatest musician, poet, and artist in history, thought that the apocalyptic fire of Rome would become his greatest work of art. He played a cruel trick on his subjects and ordered that the Eternal City should be set on fire.

* * *

As an agent of political life, “chochlik” can, under certain circumstances, pose a deadly threat. The history of the world teaches that we should always remember about it. Because we never know when the little demon will suddenly, and ominously, appear.

In the past, the political leaders of the Weimar Republic, Chancellor Franz von Pappen and President Paul von Hindenburg, believed that they could plan the future of Germany, which was sliding into chaos, to be as predictable and orderly as possible. Should democracy be threatened, they would try and stop Adolf Hitler.

They were wrong. Respectively, President Boris Yeltsin made a fatal and dreadful mistake when he anointed first as prime minister and then as his successor an inconspicuous pawn, a KGB officer named Putin. As soon as he became Russia’s new president, Putin felt so confident that he did not even bother to call Yeltsin to thank him.

Words uttered publicly, as well as unfortunate images and events for which we blame fate, have one thing in common – they suddenly trigger an avalanche of disastrous consequences in social, economic, and political life.

Both the individual and the community have to deal with such consequences all the time. As for words and images, the unexpected consequences of circulating them in a reckless manner are even more dangerous, if we consider the power of the contemporary media.

A casual remark made during a speech, a hasty opinion uttered by the head of a national bank, or an irresponsible statement made by the leader of a European state who announces that he cares about the “racial purity” of his nation – these are just a few random but vivid examples recently reported on the news.

We should take words seriously. But the human tongue is a beast that few can master. It strains constantly to break out of its cage, and if it is not tamed, it will run wild and wreak havoc. The same applies to a certain category of images that are circulated in public. They also resonate with a surprising echo. Not only through what was explicitly presented in them, but also through what was indirectly suggested – such subtexts often lead to unpredictable social effects in the process of communication.

There is one more very wise old saying that I would like to quote: “the fool shoots, but God carries the bullet.” Is it a warning? It is something more than a warning – it is a chilling reminder.

Homo informaticus does stand a chance in his fight against the overwhelming chaos. As long as he acts prudently. There is a huge gap between the unpredictable (entropic) and the predictable (which belongs to the sphere of information) – we find there accidents, possibilities, probabilities, calculations, forecasts, predictions, ways in which risks can be managed, etc.

In the process of communication, as in all human endeavors, it is impossible to completely eliminate chaos. It is an undesirable but ubiquitous element of the power play. Instead of ignoring it, we should constantly develop and improve methods to prevent it.

* * *

One last thing on which I would like to comment is explaining the presence of "chochlik" in our lives in either a rational or an irrational way. Is it something absolutely unpredictable? Or perhaps it can be prevented because there exists a certain margin of predictability? And we can hypothetically determine it if we recognize it, predict it, and explain it in terms of chaos theory?⁹

When we say that within the limits of culture, all texts, all actions, and even the most absurd acts can be read, interpreted, and explained rationally, we should remember that this includes, somewhat paradoxically, also the irrational.

The network of coordinates of the world in which we live today, stretched to the limit, contains cumulative *coincidentia oppositorum* of opposing elements of entropy and information. The constant conflict between the two affects our lives, both in terms of the material and the symbolic, constantly posing a threat to everything we try to build and create.

And fate also plays a role in the conflict between entropy and information; fate, and various random and unforeseen "accidents," cannot be ruled out.

They say accidents happen. Yes, but does this statement – supported by experience as it may be – mean that they cannot be avoided? A combination of skepticism and prudence leads us to believe that in their struggle against entropy, the individual and the community, after all, do stand a chance.

It is impossible to completely eliminate "chochliks" either from the higher order found in any "text of culture" or from our lives. We cannot protect ourselves against such unforeseen circumstances. However, we can try to minimize the chances of "chochlik" appearing and mitigate its effects.

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

⁹ Henri Poincaré, Edward Lorenz, Benoit Mandelbrot and others contributed to the innovative theory of chaos, which we owe to 20th-century mathematics. Over time, it has found numerous developments and applications in various fields of science.

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"THE DEMON OF MISPRINTS"

ABSTRACT:

An interdisciplinary study which examines the poetics of "chochlik" [the demon of misprints and slips of the tongue] in different texts of culture, from poetry to social and political life.

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