

Textual Sources in Cultural History: An Introduction

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Textual Sources in Cultural History: An Introduction

Ane Ohrvik and Cathleen Sarti

How do we approach textual sources within cultural history? Do we ‘think’ about sources and ‘work’ with them in similar ways? Is it possible to identify a specific methodology among cultural historians? Cultural history is both a subfield and a discipline in its own right. In this domain, scholars often equate methodology with the application of theories to a text. However, it is crucial to explore the gap between reading a textual source and applying theories to understand and interpret it. This need to address methodology in a didactic manner motivates this special issue. Rather than taking our interpretive methods for granted, the authors in this special issue advocate for a self-reflective consciousness, explaining what we do and why. Through investigations and discussions on how we define and categorize textual sources within cultural history, the reading strategies we apply when approaching texts, and the interpretive strategies we may employ, the articles in this issue illustrate the relationship between application and result: how our methodology impacts our findings.

Keywords: sources; reading; cultural history; methodology; didactics; historiography

How do we approach textual sources within cultural history? Do we ‘think’ about sources and ‘work’ with them in similar ways? Is it possible to identify a methodology? This issue discusses the methods applied when historians approach textual sources. Consequently, the authors featured in this issue detail their use of historical sources, discuss what they do with them, and reflect on their interpretive practices as cultural historians.

The diverse backgrounds of the authors and their shared self-identification as cultural historians are defining features of cultural history production. It is both a sub-

field of the academic discipline of history and a discipline that has emerged in its own right; however, it has also been strongly influenced by neighbouring academic disciplines such as anthropology, folklore studies, religious studies, literary studies, disciplines studying media or art, and philosophy, among others. Accordingly, the theoretical underpinnings of cultural history have been influenced by scholars as diverse as the French Annales school (Lucien Febvre, Fernand Braudel, and Marc Bloch, among others), Russian literary criticism (Bakhtin 1981, 1984, and 1986; Lotman 1990; Tamm 2019), French sociology, where particularly, Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault's ideas made significant impacts on theoretical developments in social and cultural history (Bourdieu 1979, 1992, and 1998; Foucault 1961, 1966, and 1969) and German cultural philosophy where Ernst Cassirer (1990) is regarded as having the most prominent influence. Among those contributing to the establishment of cultural history as a distinct field in terms of the use of sources, methods, and theoretical approaches are Mieke Bal, Peter Burke, Roger Chartier, Robert Darnton, Natalie Zemon Davis, Carlo Ginzburg, or Stephen Greenblatt. It is not without reason that Alessandro Arcangeli (2012, 1) titled the first chapter in his 'concise introduction' to cultural history 'In Search of a Definition: A Fuzzy Field of Enquiry'.

In the mid-twentieth century, the cultural turn in the humanities brought researchers across disciplines closer together in terms of their approaches and methods. The results differed for each discipline, but one shared aspect was the emphasis on questioning and deconstructing academic practices and master narratives. Such deconstructions were further influenced by studies showing the tension between historical realities and historiographical texts. In particular, the linguistic turn focused on the restrictions and possibilities of representing reality through text (Ankersmit

2001). Alessandro Arcangeli (2012, 29) identifies this shift as ‘the most influential factor in this field, with varying outcomes in different cultural contexts and traditions of study; the textual nature of both sources and history writing has a newly acquired central role’.

The impact of this idea on historiography, i.e. the writing of history, has been discussed at length since the publication of Hayden White’s *Metahistory* in 1973. Based on his analysis of nineteenth-century historiography, White’s study demonstrates the impossibility of any neutral or strictly objective language use in history writing. According to White, the same rules for constructing texts underlie historiography and literary writing. Arthur Danto (2013, 2007), together with White a student of William J. Bossenbrook, went even further, using analytical philosophy to demonstrate the necessity of narrativity in historical sentences. In the growing fields of cultural and social history, these ideas heavily impacted the understanding of texts and their purpose. However, the influential analysis of Hayden White and Arthur Danto and the subsequent discussion on the impact of the linguistic turn on historiography focus on the practice of writing history and the analysis of written historiography. An exception to this is Natalie Zemon Davis, who has shown in her 1987 book on petitions for royal pardons, *Fiction in the Archives*, how the careful close reading of the linguistic basis of any source reveals power structures and social conventions. However, reflections on the linguistic construction of sources and what this construction means for our approach and reading of texts are missing from discussions about the linguistic turn.

In contrast to some schools of literary analysis, historians are interested in including a cultural historical perspective of the presumed realities behind a text. Therefore, we cannot stop at textual analysis – we must also have instruments and methods available to retrieve the details and interpretations of historical realities that are as close to a historical ‘truth’ as possible. Thus, the knowledge that all texts – the ones we read and the ones we write – are subject to linguistic conventions and are always a mediated form of reality is only a first step. The second step, which becomes especially important in cultural historical research due to its emphasis on subjective experiences, representations, and perceptions, is having tools to interpret textual sources. We need to recognise the challenges they pose to accomplishing various goals, leading us to reflect on our approaches and writing. Cultural historians cannot offer the ‘complete truth’; indeed, it is now widely acknowledged in the field that such a category does not exist. However, we can offer an approximation as close to ‘historical truth’ as we can obtain under these circumstances. Furthermore, we can offer reflections on how we have reached our conclusions and interpretations to make the methodological process as transparent as possible. Displaying this transparency is a central objective of this special issue.

Within cultural historical research, there is a need for publications that address methodology in didactic ways, even if it may appear odd to describe methodological literature as lacking didactics. Scholars too often approach methodology as the equivalent of applying theories to a text. However, it is essential to investigate what happens in the gap between reading a textual source and applying theories to understand and interpret it. What are the steps we take and the decisions we make before

developing a theoretical approach? How do we interpret our texts once we have chosen and applied a specific methodology?

In cultural history, there is a gap between cutting-edge research on the epistemological aspects of our field, of which source criticism is one part, and a failure to share these insights with university undergraduates or even postgraduates. The latter is also the result from a lack of teaching materials, an absence we hope to address with this issue. When source criticism is taught, it is often taught as part of a historical methods and theories course as an essentially unchanged methodology from the nineteenth century that remains in use today. Although different historiographical schools of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries are also taught, the specific methods used in source criticism often go unmentioned. As a result, it is often left to the students to ascertain how to confront their sources and simultaneously include new ideas and approaches to history. We aim to close this gap between research and teaching by asking ourselves what we do when we approach our textual sources and reflect on why our interpretive practices appear as they do. By meticulously illuminating our methodology, we aim to reflect critically on the practice of our historical writings.

Sources

Textual sources remain the main access point to the past. Cultural and other historians use chronicles, official records, manuscripts and printed books, pamphlets and broadsheets, letters, diaries, registers, archives, and other sources to answer their questions. In this, cultural history differs from more general cultural studies, which are often more concerned with current developments and make much broader use of audio-

visual or material sources. Even after the widespread occurrence of audio-visual media, textual sources still constitute most of the material used in historical research.

Researchers rely on the written word to know and understand the past and to understand and contextualise its material and visual objects. Therefore, the authors of this special issue investigate textual sources as the main source of knowledge, although this should not diminish the importance and relevance of material and visual sources when available and appropriate to the research question.

However, texts are not clear windows into the past. This basic knowledge was already understood by the founders of modern historiography – historical science – in the nineteenth century and has been reinforced by the linguistic turn of the twentieth century, as discussed above. Peter Burke (1998, 3), one of the most prominent scholars in current cultural history, begins an important article on historical consciousness with two questions: Is it ‘possible to know the past?’ and is it ‘possible to tell the truth about “what actually happened” [...]’. When relaying the establishment of history as a discipline, he discusses the question of what to do with sources and how to interpret them. He brings to our attention the new form of the debate between history and fiction, and the question of authenticity, form, and bias in historical sources as well as historiography. Burke (1998, 16) takes on the challenges of the linguistic turn by arguing to “enrich historical writing by adopting some techniques from writers of novels, while maintain[ing] history as a genre (or better, a cluster of genres) which is distinct from fiction.”

Nineteenth-century historians in turn would have responded to the challenge of knowing the past by stating that judging the truthfulness and authenticity of texts from

the past means including a defined method to approach sources in any historical research, namely source criticism, as Charlotte Backerra expands on in this special issue. The sub-field of source criticism has become the standard methodology for any scholar of history. Several historical fields, such as social, economic, and oral history, have developed refined approaches to source criticism, emphasising different kinds of source material or highlighting a particular approach. The focus of cultural history on perceptions, symbols, and narratives and the interest in the everyday life of non-elites have led cultural and social historians to prefer letters and other personal papers, media outlets, or books over charters, official records, and statistics. However, there are far too many exceptions to classify this as a common feature. An example is the vibrant and extensive cultural historical research into witchcraft and magic in early modern Europe, which largely uses official trial records. As such, specific source genres are not a defining characteristic of cultural and social history. More important than source genres are the questions cultural historians pose regarding such materials and our subsequent reflections following our reading of them.

Several features distinguish source criticism in cultural history from other historical source criticism, including a focus on the linguistic contexts of any textual source and an enhanced tendency to include theoretical approaches when contextualising and interpreting a source. Cultural history is also distinctive within the historical realm as an interdisciplinary field that transcends the disciplinary boundaries of history. Interdisciplinarity is also practised in other sub-disciplines of history; however, few have transformed into their own field. Therefore, many cultural historians are not trained as historians and are also new to historical methods. Furthermore, they bring different methods from outside disciplines and apply these to the materials used in

cultural history, including sources. Their approaches are a welcome expansion to traditional historical approaches to sources and the epistemology of the past. Additionally, the cultural turn has broadened the scope of relevant material used for studying the past. This shift has occurred in both non-textual and textual sources. The cultural historical focus on perception, representation, non-elites, history from below, and discourses – among others – requires new material to answer its pressing questions.

Two articles in this special issue will closely investigate source criticism and the categorisation of textual sources for cultural historians. Demonstrating the change in using and analysing sources in diplomatic history, Charlotte Backerra reflects on the continued benefits of nineteenth-century source criticism in current research.

Nonetheless, she argues, adaptations are necessary to answer the challenges raised above and to address research questions specific to new approaches in diplomatic history, including issues raised by cultural historians. The second article, by Cathleen Sarti, focuses on a different part of the historical method: the selection and valuation of sources. In particular, she argues for a cessation of established categorisations of sources into primary and secondary or traditions and relics. Sarti discusses why thinking about source categories is essential for cultural history, providing examples from historiographical works on the later Stuart period in Britain that have employed these new categories, abandoning older forms without explicitly addressing them in their work.

Reading Strategies

When considering various strategies for reading sources, there are at least four, possibly

five, concepts in play. Reading may be described as something we do fast. However, we may also do it slowly, distantly, or closely, with some even discussing deep reading as a possible strategy. These strategies influence our comprehension and the readability of a text, partially shaping its meaning and differing in their interpretive capacities.

Fast reading, or speed-reading, combines techniques such as eye fixation and perceptual span with the ability to decode text (Love 2012, 66). This strategy often involves skimming, which entails visually searching sentences for meaning, and scanning, which involves actively seeking information based on a mental map formed through skimming (by organising information in a visually hierarchical manner). Studies have shown that the maximum reading speed while identifying each word is 500 words per minute, while the average reading speed is about 250 words per minute (Love 2012, 66). Given the superficial nature of skimming and scanning, speed-reading apps like Spritz, which employ rapid serial visual presentation (RSVP), can reach speeds of up to 750 words per minute (Kukkonen 2021).

In contrast, slow reading, as described by Lancelot Fletcher, does not begin with reading itself. Fletcher states, 'When reading begins, you are already reading. You have been reading for a long time. Slow reading starts, not with reading but with slowing. But even that is not quite right. It would be more accurate to say that slow reading starts with stopping, with turning around' (Fletcher 2007, 2). Fletcher classifies slow reading as a philosophical approach that subverts conventional reading by emphasising interpretation—the process of meaning creation. Unlike close reading, which seeks subtext, implicit meanings, and authorial intent, slow reading is concerned with the broader creation of meaning. Rather, it aims at an honest, respectful reading of the text

or, as Simone Drichel succinctly puts it, ‘a way of reading well’ (Drichel 2011, 3). Slow reading is related to close reading but differs in interpretation strategies and depth. In contemporary academia, slow reading has garnered attention from literary scholars and philosophers who advocate slowing down when engaging with texts. This deceleration links the reader’s relationship with the text to questions of ethics and values and serves to counteract the distractions of digital technologies that significantly alter focus, vision, and concentration (cf. Huddart 2014, 116–32; Miedema 2009; Mikics 2013; Walker 2016). Furthermore, this relationship between the slow reader and the text often favours reading physical books over digital formats.

Reading speed impacts our ability to process information and recall it later, making slow and fast reading practices of interest to psychologists and educational specialists, as well as literary scholars. As cultural and social historians, we may employ both fast and slow reading strategies. Fast reading helps us sift through large source corpora and select relevant sources, while slow reading often serves as our initial engagement with texts. Within historical sciences, this also relates to the problem of categorising sources, as discussed by Cathleen Sarti in this issue, and of criticising them, as discussed by Charlotte Backerra. Both fast and slow reading require interpretive strategies suited to their distinct possibilities and limitations. However, neither strategy has been incorporated into our systematically built scholarly methodology, as opposed to close reading and distant reading; both close and distant reading are the subjects of methodological discussions in this issue.

In the twentieth century, scholars primarily discussed close reading as a specific strategy within literary studies. The New Criticism movement, which began in the

1920s, emphasised the autonomy of texts, significantly shaping the development of close reading for several decades (see e.g. Richards 1930; Ransome 1941; Brooks 1947). Central to this movement was the autonomy of texts, asserting that poems should be treated primarily as poems, not historical examples. This approach emphasised words, images, and symbols over persons, thoughts, and plots. Consequently, close reading initially provided a detailed structural analysis of the relationships between different elements in a literary text, whether through creative interpretation emphasising ambiguity and metaphor or a formalist approach focusing on speaker, tension, tone, and organic form.

Today, close reading is an integral part of hermeneutic interpretive methodology. As Ane Ohrvik demonstrates in her article, close reading as a specific interpretive strategy can be traced back to the earliest development of hermeneutics, focusing on reading texts as both a skill and an interpretive method. Ohrvik explores what close reading implies for cultural historians, how it has been discussed and developed by various disciplines over the past century, and what it entails in contemporary practice. She examines attentive reading techniques as basic physical and cognitive practices essential for understanding close reading as a methodology, coupled with a self-reflective examination of her own reading strategies. Advocating for a more conscious reading approach, Ohrvik outlines three steps that characterise the close reading process.

An often-contrasted strategy to close reading is distant reading, attributed to the literary historian Franco Moretti who suggests ‘a pact with the Devil’, and which is discussed in this special issue by Hannu Salmi. Aiming to open the study of world

literature and reinterpret the context of literary production in terms of a world market, Moretti argues that close reading is unsuitable for this purpose. He claims, ‘the trouble with close reading (in all its incarnations, from the new criticism to deconstruction) is that it necessarily depends on an extremely small canon. [...] You invest so much in individual texts only if you think that very few of them really matter’ (Moretti 2000, 57). Addressing the potential conflict in the power of the example inherent in close reading, Moretti advocates a different ‘less is more’ strategy:

We know how to read texts, now let’s learn how not to read them. Distant reading: where distance, let me repeat it, is a condition of knowledge: it allows you to focus on units that are much smaller or much larger than the text: devices, themes, tropes – or genres and systems. And if, between the very small and the very large, the text itself disappears, well, it is one of those cases when one can justifiably say, less is more. (Moretti 2000, 57)

As a result, distant reading introduces macro studies and macroanalysis by harnessing big data collections through computer algorithms. Moretti’s radical methodology (an approach he does not seem to explain sufficiently or systematically) has itself been subjected to ‘close readings’ and has generated waves of critical comments, objections, and praise over the last two decades (see e.g. Serlen 2010; Khadem 2012; Ascari 2014; Freedman 2015; Erb, Ganahl, and Kilian 2016, Underwood 2017). A common critique relates to Moretti’s use of the term ‘reading’ and what kind of process that entails. For Johanna Druckner,

Processing is not reading. It is literal, automatic, and repetitive. Reading is ideational, hermeneutic, generative, and productive. Processing strives for accuracy, reading for leniency or transformation. No text-analysis program weeps when it reads the passages in Felix Salten’s *Bambi* in which Bambi’s mother dies. (Druckner 2017, 630)

The distinct difference and opposition between mechanical processing and cognitive interpretations lie at the heart of Druckner's critique. For Moretti (2000, 68), reading strategies serve two different epistemological approaches:

The products of cultural history are always composite ones: but which is the dominant mechanism in their composition? The internal or the external? The nation or the world? The tree or the wave? There is no way to settle this controversy once and for all – fortunately: because comparatists need controversy. [...] No; the universe is the same, the literatures are the same, we just look at them from a different viewpoint.

The argument that different research questions demand distinct reading approaches also motivates Hannu Salmi's article 'Textuality as Amplification: Reconsidering Close Reading and Distant Reading in Cultural History'. Salmi adapts Moretti's perspective on distant reading to explore how this strategy can contribute to the study of cultural history. He argues for its value in studies of cultural transmissions in the past and as a strategy for recognising textual amplification. Combining the study of textual signification with the perspective of textuality as material flow, Salmi demonstrates how digital technology facilitates new ways of reading sources. Salmi challenges the perception of close reading and aims to bridge the concepts of 'closeness' and 'distance', advocating for a simultaneous and complementary approach to distant and close reading of big data.

Textual Sources and Reading Strategies

Two articles extend the perspectives on sources and reading discussed in previous sections through their in-depth interpretations of texts. Both articles highlight the benefits of meticulous reading of sources, and reflecting on every step when

approaching them. They mirror each other by selecting fictional texts as starting points and aiming to uncover the meaning impact of these texts in the time when they were written. The authors investigate how such texts reflect temporalities, shifting focus from the broader discussions in earlier parts to practical demonstrations of reading textual sources within cultural and social history.

As his fictional source, Dirk Johannsen uses a Danish novel from 1880 and its wider cultural context to show how narratives model and shape cultural realities. In his article, entitled ‘Pietistic Atheism and the Modern Breakthrough: On the Narrative Culture of Secularity’, Johannsen examines how narratives as sources serve as ‘windows into the realities of the past’. Stories draw on established cultural scripts that make them relatable, but these scripts must be altered to attract attention. Johannsen demonstrates that, in the context of the Nordic secular movement, emerging alternative scripts can foster new cultural dynamics and alter the course of social movements.

In ‘Between Agency and Event: The Book of Job as a Greek Tragedy’, Jakob Egholm Feldt explores Horace M. Kallen’s 1918 play by the same name, describing it as an ‘actor-event’. He illustrates how the play, as a source, may be seen both as an actor that brings meaning and as an event that ‘happens’, challenging the traditional historical view of sources as ‘witness-subjects’. Feldt adopts a pragmatism-inspired approach to reading, viewing the text as an agent, which involves being attentive to the *presence* of the past in the text. Feldt shows how it connects contrasting temporalities into the problems of a present, demonstrating that the play (as an event) was made meaningful both in its original context and today.

In sum, this issue underlines that we, as cultural historians, are not limited to reading a specific genre but may perceive any text as a potential source. While benefitting from the historiographical heritage of source criticism, we must continue to develop our practices to meet current needs and demands. Including new source genres in our research and posing new questions requires new methods of source criticism and reading practices. By not taking our interpretive methods for granted and instead stressing a self-reflective consciousness of what we do and why, we may uncover new answers to old questions and illuminate the complexity of texts. This complexity of texts contributes to the need for a greater variety of reading techniques, and a continued focus on reading strategies in cultural history.

The articles in this special issue are theoretical, methodological, and exemplary starting points to explore and interpret textual sources. Nonetheless, as cultural history remains “fuzzy” and ever-changing, we argue not for establishing a new methodology or theory, but rather for constantly reflecting on our approaches. The categories of source we choose, the framework of our source criticism, whether we “swallow” a great quantity of texts, or “chew and digest” only a particular few, will change the outcome of our analysis, and the answer to the questions we bring. Being, foremost, self-reflective as researchers, and secondly, transparent about these processes to our readers, is a call to action from this special issue.

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