

Student A:

### **Thick description**

In his essay, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture" (1973), Clifford Geertz borrows an example from philosopher Gilbert Ryle to distinguish between two ways of describing human behavior. The example involves a wink. "Thin description," as Geertz explains it, refers only to the physical characteristics of the wink ("rapidly contracting the right eyelids") and thus makes it impossible to understand the wink's symbolic meaning. "Thick description," in contrast, explores the symbolic context in which the wink takes place, the intentions and culture of the winker and the people who see him or her wink. It thus makes it possible to distinguish between an accidental wink, a real wink, a pretend wink, a pretend-wink-taken-as-real, and so on. Thick description, says Geertz, is (part of) what anthropologists are supposed to do.

All three of the works we read this week--Darnton's *The Great Cat Massacre*, Geertz's "Deep Play: Notes on a Balinese Cockfight," and Kuhn's *Soulstealers*--seem to be aiming for thick description. In the case of *The Great Cat Massacre*, it is probably safe to guess that Geertz's ideas had some influence, since Darnton mentions that he wrote the book after co-teaching a course with Geertz for six years. Neither Geertz nor Darnton are cited by Kuhn, but in his attempt to describe the various meanings that the sorcery scare held for peasants, provincial bureaucrats, and the emperor, he seems to be aiming for the same goal. This approach is a striking contrast to last week's reading in historical demography, in which the authors made little attempt to move beyond thin descriptions of overt behavior, and restricted themselves to very limited kinds of data even there. The benefit of the anthropological approach is a much richer depiction of how people really experienced their lives; the risk, as Darnton points out in his conclusion, is that one's depiction may be based on vague or nonrepresentative sources. Trying to decide whether thin or thick (or quantitative or qualitative) approaches are better is probably a waste of time; they use different methods and accomplish different things.

### **Violence**

There were a number of common themes among the three works, especially around issues of power, dominance, competition, and the relationship between individuals/communities and the state. But the theme that attracted my interest most strongly--in part because I could not initially make sense of it--was that of violence to the bodies of animals and humans. In *Soulstealers*, the bodies of peasants, monks, beggars, and vagrants serve as arenas for the struggle between bureaucratic power and absolute power. In the title chapter of *The Great Cat Massacre*, the bodies of cats are the symbolic material with which the printers construct a critique of their "bourgeois." In "Deep Play," cock fights are a means of expressing and exploring power relations. In each of these cases, our interest is focused not on the bodies themselves, but on the meanings written into or tortured out of them. As Geertz notes, "the cockfight is 'really real' only to the cocks" (443).

But there must be a reason why the testimony of beggars (not the quality of the harvest) is critical to Kuhn's story; why the murder of cats (not the destruction of property) is Darnton's key to understanding 18th-century relations between workers and their masters; why cock fights (not dice games) are Geertz's way of shedding light on power relations among the Balinese. Bodies, as bodies, seem to be particularly well-suited to the kinds of meaning these microhistories ask them to carry.

Perhaps these stories of violence are attractive to writers of microhistories because they are so vivid and immediate: the experience of pain is the hook that reels the reader into an alien world. Or perhaps it is their strangeness and incomprehensibility that gives them their power: the tortured body is the unfunny joke that reveals important cultural differences. Another possible explanation, one that focuses on social processes rather than on the writing of history, is that the agency ascribed to the bodies of cats, cocks, and peasants allows them to be used as masks for the agency exercised by French workers, Balinese men, and Chinese bureaucrats. Cats, cocks,

and peasants make it possible for the people using them to pretend that something other than a power struggle is going on. The struggle is displaced onto bodies that can be plausibly argued to have some kind of autonomy themselves--whether the autonomy of peasants who can lie or tell the truth, of cats that can keep you or your boss up at night, of cocks that can fight well or badly. This kind of displacement might be a particularly productive site of analysis for histories that try to describe how power relations are constructed, maintained, and expressed on the ground.