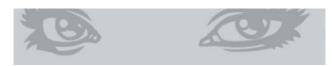# PART ONE

CULTURE AND CULTURAL STUDIES

AN INTRODUCTION TO CULTURAL STUDIES

1

Given the title of this book – *Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice* – it would be reasonable to expect a comprehensive account of cultural studies, including summaries and discussions of its main arguments and substantive sites of intellectual enquiry. Indeed, this is what has been attempted. However, I want to open this account of cultural studies with a kind of 'health warning' regarding the scope of the book.

CONCERNING THIS BOOK

Selectivity

Any book about cultural studies is necessarily selective and likely to engender debate, argument and even conflict. To offer a truly comprehensive account of cultural studies would be to reproduce, or at least to summarize, every single text ever written within the parameters of cultural studies. Not only would this be too mammoth a task for any writer, but also the problem would remain of deciding which texts warranted the nomination. Consequently, this book, like all others, is implicated in constructing a *particular version* of cultural studies.

I do offer, under the rubric of 'culture and cultural studies', some (selective) history of the field. However, most of the later chapters, the *sites* of cultural studies, draw on more contemporary theory. Indeed, in order to make the book as useful as possible in as many different geographical places as possible, there is a stress on theory over context-specific empirical work (though theory is also context-specific and the text does try to link theory

with empirical work). In doing so, I deploy a good number of theorists who would not describe themselves as working within cultural studies but who have something to say which has informed it. Thus, writers like Tony Bennett, Paul Gilroy, Lawrence Grossberg, Stuart Hall, Meaghan Morris and Paul Willis would probably accept a description of their work as 'cultural studies'. However, though extremely influential, neither Foucault, Derrida nor Barthes would have described himself in this way, just as Giddens would not adopt this self-nomination today.

This book is a selective account because it stresses a certain type of cultural studies. In particular, I explore that version of cultural studies which places language at its heart. The kind of cultural studies influenced by poststructuralist theories of language, representation and subjectivity is given greater attention than a cultural studies more concerned with the ethnography of lived experience or with cultural policy. Nevertheless, both do receive attention and I am personally supportive of both.

$\checkmark$ Cultural studies does not speak with one voice, it cannot be spoken with one voice, and I do not have one voice with which to represent it.

The title of this book is somewhat over-ambitious in its claims. Not only is this a selective account of cultural studies, it is also one that draws very largely from work developed in Britain, the United States, Continental Europe (most notably France) and Australia. I draw very little from a growing body of work in Africa, Asia and Latin America. As such, it would be more accurate to call this text 'western cultural studies'. I simply do not feel qualified to say how much cultural studies, as I understand it, is pertinent to the social and cultural conditions of Africa.

The language-game of cultural studies

Further, this book tends to gloss over differences within western cultural studies, despite doubts about whether theory developed in one context (e.g. Britain) can be workable in another (e.g. Australia) (Ang and Stratton, 1996; Turner, 1992). Nevertheless, I want to justify this degree of generalization about cultural studies. I maintain that the term 'cultural studies' has no referent to which we can point. Rather, cultural studies is constituted by the language-game of cultural studies. The theoretical terms developed and deployed by persons calling their work cultural studies are what cultural studies 'is'. I stress the language of cultural studies as constitutive of cultural studies and draw attention at the start of each chapter to what I take to be important terms. Subsequently, each of these concepts, and others, can be referred to in the Glossary at the end of the book.

These are concepts that have been deployed in the various geographical sites of cultural studies. For, as Grossberg et al. have argued, though cultural studies has stressed conjunctural

analysis, 'which is embedded, descriptive, and historically and contextually specific', there are some concepts in cultural studies across the globe which form 'a history of real achievements that is now part of the cultural studies tradition', and to do without which would be 'to willingly accept real incapacitation' (Grossberg et al., 1992: 8). Concepts are tools for thinking and acting in the world.

Cultural studies as politics

It remains difficult to pin down the boundaries of cultural studies as a coherent, unified, academic discipline with clear-cut substantive topics, concepts and methods that differentiate it from other disciplines. Cultural studies has always been a multi- or post-disciplinary field of enquiry which blurs the boundaries between itself and other 'subjects'. Yet cultural studies cannot be said to be anything. It is not physics, it is not sociology and it is not linguistics, though it draws upon these subject areas. Indeed, there must be, as Hall (1992a) argues, something at stake in cultural studies that differentiates it from other subject areas.

For Hall, what is at stake is the connection that cultural studies seeks to make to matters of power and cultural politics. That is, to an exploration of representations of and 'for' marginalized social groups and the need for cultural change. Hence, cultural studies is a body of theory generated by thinkers who regard the production of theoretical knowledge as a political practice. Here, knowledge is never a neutral or objective phenomenon but a matter of positionality, that is, of the place from which one speaks, to whom, and for what purposes.

THE PARAMETERS OF CULTURAL STUDIES

There is a difference between the study of culture and institutionally located cultural studies. The study of culture has taken place in a variety of academic disciplines – sociology, anthropology, English literature, etc. – and in a range of geographical and institutional spaces. However, this is not to be understood as cultural studies. The study of culture has no origins, and to locate one is to exclude other possible starting points. Nevertheless this does not mean that cultural studies cannot be named and its key concepts identified.

Cultural studies is a discursive formation, that is, 'a cluster (or *formation*) of ideas, images and practices, which provide ways of talking about, forms of knowledge and conduct associated with, a particular topic, social activity or institutional site in society' (Hall, 1997a: 6). Cultural studies is constituted by a *regulated* way of speaking about objects (which it brings into view) and coheres around key concepts, ideas and concerns. Further, cultural studies had a moment at which it named itself, even though that naming marks only a cut or snapshot of an ever-evolving intellectual project.

KEY THINKERS

Stuart Hall (1932–)

A West Indian–born British thinker initially associated with the 'New Left' of the late-1960s, Hall was the Director of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies from 1968 to 1979. It was during this time that an identifiable and particular field called cultural studies began to emerge. Stuart Hall is perhaps the most significant figure in the development of British cultural studies. His work makes considerable use of Gramsci and the concepts of ideology and hegemony, though he also played a significant part in deploying poststructuralism in cultural studies.

Reading: Morley, D. and Chen, D.-K. (eds) (1996) *Stuart Hall*. London: Routledge.

The Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies

Cultural studies has been reluctant to accept institutional legitimation. Nevertheless, the formation of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham University (UK) in the 1960s was a decisive organizational instance. Since that time, cultural studies has extended its intellectual base and geographic scope. There are self-defined cultural studies practitioners in the USA, Australia, Africa, Asia, Latin America and Europe, with each 'formation' of cultural studies working in different ways. While I am not privileging British cultural studies *per se*, I am pointing to the formation of cultural studies at Birmingham as an institutionally significant moment.

Since its emergence, cultural studies has acquired a multitude of institutional bases, courses, textbooks and students as it has become something to be taught. As McGuigan (1997a) comments, it is difficult to see how it could be otherwise, despite the concern that professionalized and institutionalized cultural studies may 'formalize out of existence the critical questions of power, history and politics' (Hall, 1992a: 286). Cultural studies' main location has always been institutions of higher education and the bookshop. Consequently, one way of 'defining' cultural studies is to look at what university courses offer to students. This necessarily involves 'disciplining' cultural studies.

Disciplining cultural studies

Many cultural studies practitioners oppose forging disciplinary boundaries for the field. However, it is hard to see how this can be resisted if cultural studies wants to survive by attracting degree students and funding (as opposed to being only a postgraduate research activity). In that context, Bennett (1998) offers his 'element of a definition' of cultural studies:

- Cultural studies is an interdisciplinary field in which perspectives from different disciplines can be selectively drawn on to examine the relations of culture and power.

- 'Cultural studies is concerned with all those practices, institutions and systems of classification through which there are inculcated in a population particular values, beliefs, competencies, routines of life and habitual forms of conduct' (Bennett, 1998: 28).

- The forms of power that cultural studies explores are diverse and include gender, race, class, colonialism, etc. Cultural studies seeks to explore the connections between these forms of power and to develop ways of thinking about culture and power that can be utilized by agents in the pursuit of change.

- The prime institutional sites for cultural studies are those of higher education, and as such, cultural studies is like other academic disciplines. Nevertheless, it tries to forge connections outside of the academy with social and political movements, workers in cultural institutions, and cultural management.

With this in mind, we may consider the kinds of concepts and concerns that regulate cultural studies as a discursive formation or language-game. Each of the concepts introduced here is developed at greater length throughout the book and can also be referred to in the Glossary.

KEY CONCEPTS IN CULTURAL STUDIES

Culture and signifying practices

Cultural studies would not warrant its name without a focus on culture (Chapter 2). As Hall puts it, 'By culture, here I mean the actual grounded terrain of practices, representations, languages and customs of any specific society. I also mean the contradictory forms of common sense which have taken root in and helped to shape popular life' (Hall, 1996c: 439). Culture is concerned with questions of shared social meanings, that is, the various ways we make sense of the world. However, meanings are not simply floating 'out there'; rather, they are generated through signs, most notably those of language.

Cultural studies has argued that language is not a neutral medium for the formation of meanings and knowledge about an independent object world 'existing' outside of language. Rather, it is constitutive of those very meanings and knowledge. That is, language gives meaning to material objects and social practices that are brought into view by language and made intelligible to us in terms that language delimits. These processes of meaning production are signifying practices. In order to understand culture, we need to explore how meaning is produced symbolically in language as a 'signifying system' (Chapter 3).
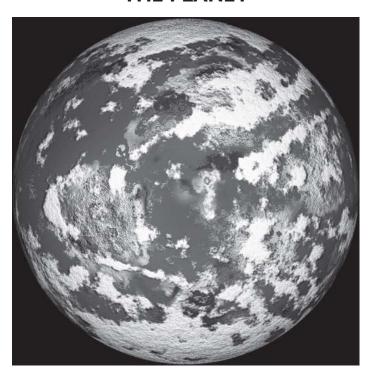
Representation

A good deal of cultural studies is centred on questions of representation; that is, on how the world is socially constructed and represented to and by us in meaningful ways. Indeed, the central strand of cultural studies can be understood as the study of culture as the signifying practices of representation. This requires us to explore the textual generation of meaning. It also demands investigation of the modes by which meaning is produced in a variety of contexts. Further, cultural representations and meanings have a certain materiality. That is, they are embedded in sounds, inscriptions, objects, images, books, magazines and television programmes. They are produced, enacted, used and understood in specific social contexts.

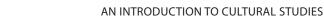## THE PLANET

© Photographer: Svetlana Prevzentseva | Agency: Dreamstime.com

○ Is this image a reflection of the natural world or a cultural representation?

○ This picture was only possible with the advent of space travel. How might its appearance in our culture have changed the way we think about ourselves?

○ Can you imagine cultural life without this picture in our minds?

Materialism and non-reductionism

Cultural studies has, for the most part, been concerned with modern industrialized economies and media cultures organized along capitalist lines. Here representations are produced by corporations who are driven by the profit motive. In this context, cultural studies has developed a form of cultural materialism that is concerned with exploring how and why meanings are inscribed at the moment of production. That is, as well as being centred on signifying practices, cultural studies tries to connect them with political economy. This is a discipline concerned with power and the distribution of economic and social resources. Consequently, cultural studies has been concerned with:

- who owns and controls cultural production;
- the distribution mechanisms for cultural products;
- the consequences of patterns of ownership and control for contours of the cultural landscape.

Having said that, one of the central tenets of cultural studies is its non-reductionism. Culture is seen as having its own specific meanings, rules and practices which are not reducible to, or explainable solely in terms of, another category or level of a social formation. In particular, cultural studies has waged a battle against economic reductionism; that is, the attempt to explain what a cultural text means by reference to its place in the production process. For cultural studies, the processes of political economy do not determine the meanings of texts or their appropriation by audiences. Rather, political economy, social relationships and culture must be understood in terms of their own specific logics and modes of development. Each of these domains is 'articulated' or related together in context-specific ways. The non-reductionism of cultural studies insists that questions of class, gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, nation and age have their own particularities which cannot be reduced either to political economy or to each other.

Articulation

Cultural studies has deployed the concept of articulation in order to theorize the relationships between components of a social formation. This idea refers to the formation of a temporary unity between elements that do not have to go together. Articulation suggests both expressing/representing and a 'putting-together'. Thus, representations of gender may be 'put-together' with representations of race or nation so that, for example, nations are spoken of as female. This occurs in context-specific and contingent ways that cannot be predicted before the fact. The concept of articulation is also deployed to discuss the relationship between culture and political economy. Thus culture is said to be 'articulated' with

moments of production but not determined in any 'necessary' way by that moment, and vice versa. Consequently, we might explore not only how the moment of production is inscribed in texts but also how the 'economic' is cultural; that is, a meaningful set of practices.

Power

Cultural studies writers generally agree on the centrality of the concept of power to the discipline. For most cultural studies writers, power is regarded as pervading every level of social relationships. Power is not simply the glue that holds the social together, or the coercive force which subordinates one set of people to another, though it certainly is this. It is also understood in terms of the processes that generate and enable any form of social action, relationship or order. In this sense, power, while certainly constraining, is also enabling. Having said that, cultural studies has shown a specific concern with subordinated groups, at first with class, and later with races, genders, nations, age groups, etc.

Popular culture

Subordination is a matter not just of coercion but also of consent. Cultural studies has commonly understood popular culture to be the ground on which this consent is won or lost. As a way of grasping the interplay of power and consent, two related concepts were repeatedly deployed in cultural studies' earlier texts, though they are less prevalent these days – namely, ideology and hegemony.

By ideology is commonly meant maps of meaning that, while they purport to be universal truths, are historically specific understandings that obscure and maintain power. For example, television news produces understandings of the world that continually explain it in terms of nations, perceived as 'naturally' occurring objects. This may have the consequence of obscuring both the class divisions of social formations and the constructed character of nationality.

Representations of gender in advertising, which depict women as housewives or sexy bodies alone, reduce them to those categories. As such, they deny women their place as full human beings and citizens. The process of making, maintaining and reproducing ascendant meanings and practices has been called hegemony. Hegemony implies a situation where a 'historical bloc' of powerful groups exercises social authority and leadership over subordinate groups through the winning of consent.

Texts and readers

The production of consent implies popular identification with the cultural meanings generated by the signifying practices of hegemonic texts. The concept of text suggests not simply the written word, though this is one of its senses, but also all practices that signify. This

includes the generation of meaning through images, sounds, objects (such as clothes) and activities (like dance and sport). Since images, sounds, objects and practices are sign systems, which signify with the same mechanism as a language, we may refer to them as cultural texts.

However, the meanings that critics read into cultural texts are not necessarily the same as those produced by active audiences or readers. Indeed, readers will not necessarily share all the same meanings with each other. Critics, in other words, are simply a particular breed of reader. Further, texts, as forms of representation, are polysemic. That is, they contain the possibility of a number of different meanings that have to be realized by actual readers who give life to words and images. We can examine the ways in which texts work, but we cannot simply 'read-off' audiences' meaning production from textual analysis. At the very least, meaning is produced in the interplay between text and reader. Consequently, the moment of consumption is also a moment of meaningful production.

Subjectivity and identity

The moment of consumption marks one of the processes by which we are formed as persons. What it is to be a person, viz. subjectivity, and how we describe ourselves to each other, viz. identity, became central areas of concern in cultural studies during the 1990s. In other words, cultural studies explores:

- how we come to be the kinds of people we are;

- how we are produced as subjects;

- how we identify with (or emotionally invest in) descriptions of ourselves as male or female, black or white, young or old.

The argument, known as *anti-essentialism*, is that identities are not things that exist; they have no essential or universal qualities. Rather, they are discursive constructions, the product of discourses or regulated ways of speaking about the world. In other words, identities are constituted, made rather than found, by representations, notably language.

Overall, some of the key concepts that constitute the discursive formation of cultural studies are:

KEY CONCEPTS

Active audiences	*Politics*
Anti-essentialism	*Polysemy*
Articulation	*Popular culture*
Cultural materialism	*Positionality*
Culture	*Power*

Discourse   *Representation*
Discursive formation   *Signifying practices*
Hegemony   *(the) Social*
Identity   *Social formation*
Ideology   *Subjectivity*
Language-game   *Texts*
Political economy

✓ Cultural studies writers differ about how to deploy these concepts and about which are the most significant.

THE INTELLECTUAL STRANDS OF CULTURAL STUDIES

The concepts we have explored are drawn from a range of theoretical and methodological paradigms. The most influential theories within cultural studies have been: Marxism, culturalism, structuralism, poststructuralism, psychoanalysis and the politics of difference (under which heading, for the sake of convenience, I include feminism, theories of race, ethnicity and postcolonialism). The purpose of sketching the basic tenets of these theoretical domains is to provide a signpost to thinking in the field. However, each is developed in more detail throughout the text and there is no one place in the book to look for theory. Theory permeates all levels of cultural studies and needs to be connected to specific issues and debates rather than explored solely in the abstract.
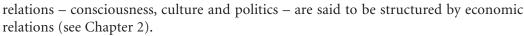
Marxism and the centrality of class

Marxism is, above all, a form of historical materialism. It stresses the historical specificity of human affairs and the changeable character of social formations whose core features are located in the material conditions of existence. Marx (1961) argued that the first priority of human beings is the production of their means of subsistence through labour. As humans produce food, clothes and all manner of tools with which to shape their environment, so they also create themselves. Thus labour, and the forms of social organization that material production takes, a mode of production, are central categories of Marxism.

The organization of a mode of production is not simply a matter of co-ordinating objects; rather, it is inherently tied up with relations between people. These relationships, while social, that is, co-operative and co-ordinated, are also matters of power and conflict. Indeed, Marxists regard social antagonisms as being the motor of historical change. Further, given the priority accorded to production, other aspects of human

relations – consciousness, culture and politics – are said to be structured by economic relations (see Chapter 2).

For Marxism, history is not a smooth evolutionary process. Rather, it is marked by significant breaks and discontinuities of modes of production. Thus, Marx discusses the transformations from an ancient mode of production to a feudal mode of production and thence to the capitalist mode of production. Different forms of material organization and different social relations characterize each mode of production. Further, each mode of production is superseded by another as internal contradictions, particularly those of class conflict, lead to its transformation and replacement.

Capitalism

The centrepiece of Marx's work was an analysis of the dynamics of capitalism. This is a mode of production premised on the private ownership of the means of production (in his day, factories, mills, workshops; and in a more contemporary vein, multinational corporations). The fundamental class division of capitalism is between those who own the means of production, the bourgeoisie, and those who, being a propertyless proletariat, must sell their labour to survive.

The legal framework and common-sense thinking of capitalist societies declare that the worker is a free agent and the sale of labour a free and fair contract. However, Marx argues that this appearance covers over a fundamental exploitation at work. Capitalism aims to make a profit and does so by extracting surplus value from workers. That is, the value of the labour taken to produce a product, which becomes the property of the bourgeoisie, is less than the worker receives for it.

The realization of surplus value in monetary form is achieved by the selling of goods (which have both 'use value' and 'exchange value') as commodities. A commodity is something available to be sold in the marketplace. Thus, commodification is the process associated with capitalism by which objects, qualities and signs are turned into commodities. The surface appearance of goods sold in the marketplace obscures the origins of those commodities in an exploitative relationship, a process Marx calls commodity fetishism. Further, the fact that workers are faced with the products of their own labour now separated from them constitutes alienation. Since the proletariat are alienated from the core of human activity, namely the labour process, so they are also alienated from themselves.

Capitalism is a dynamic system whose profit-driven mechanisms lead to the continual revolutionizing of the means of production and the forging of new markets. For Marx, this was its great merit in relation to feudalism. This is because it heralded a massive expansion in the productive capacities of European societies. It dragged them into the modern world of railways, mass production, cities and a formally equitable and free set of human relations in which people were not, in a legal sense, the property of others (as were serfs in feudal societies).

However, the mechanisms of capitalism also give rise to perennial crises and will ultimately lead, or so Marx argued, to its being superseded by socialism. Problems for capitalism include:

- a falling rate of profit;

- cycles of boom and bust;

- an increasing monopoly;

- the creation of a proletariat which is set to become the system's grave-digger.

Marx hoped that capitalism would be rent asunder by class conflict. He envisaged the proletariat's organizations of defence, trade unions and political parties, overthrowing and replacing it with a mode of production based on communal ownership, equitable distribution and ultimately the end of class division.

Marxism and cultural studies

Cultural studies writers have had a long, ambiguous, but productive relationship with Marxism. Cultural studies is not a Marxist domain, but has drawn succour from it while subjecting it to vigorous critique. There is little doubt that we live in social formations organized along capitalist lines that manifest deep class divisions in work, wages, housing, education and health. Further, cultural practices are commodified by large corporate culture industries. In that context cultural studies has been partisan in taking up the cause of change.

However, Marxism has been critiqued for its apparent teleology. That is, the positing of an inevitable point to which history is moving, namely the demise of capitalism and the arrival of a classless society. This is a problem on both theoretical and empirical grounds. Theoretically, a determinist reading of Marxism robs human beings of agency or the capacity to act. This is so because the outcomes of human action appear to be predetermined by metaphysical laws (ironically posing as objective science) that drive history from outside of human action. It is a problem on empirical grounds because of the failure of significant numbers of proletarian revolutions to materialize, and the oppressive totalitarian outcomes of those that made claims to be such revolutions.

In its engagement with Marxism, cultural studies has been particularly concerned with issues of structure and action. On the one hand, Marxism suggests that there are regularities or structures to human existence that lie outside of any given individual. On the other hand, it has a commitment to change through human agency.

Cultural studies has resisted the economic determinism inherent in some readings of Marxism and has asserted the specificity of culture. Cultural studies has also been concerned with the apparent success of capitalism – that is, not merely its survival but its transformation and expansion. This has been attributed in part to the winning of consent for capitalism on the level of culture. Hence the interest in questions of culture, ideology and hegemony (see Chapter 2) which were commonly pursued through perspectives dubbed culturalism and structuralism (see Hall, 1992a).

Culturalism and structuralism

In the collective mythology of cultural studies, Richard Hoggart (1957), Raymond Williams (1965, 1979, 1981, 1983) and Edward Thompson (1963) are held to be early figureheads representing the moment of 'culturalism'. This perspective is later contrasted with 'structuralism'. Indeed, culturalism is a *post hoc* term that owes its sense precisely to a contrast with structuralism.

Culture is ordinary

Culturalism stresses the 'ordinariness' of culture and the active, creative capacity of people to construct shared meaningful practices. Empirical work, which is emphasized within the culturalist tradition, explores the way that active human beings create cultural meanings. There is a focus on lived experience and the adoption of a broadly anthropological definition of culture which describes it as an everyday lived process not confined to 'high' art.

Culturalism, particularly for Williams and Thompson, is a form of historical cultural materialism that traces the unfolding of meaning over time. Here culture is to be explored within the context of its material conditions of production and reception. There is an explicit partisanship in exploring the class basis of culture that aims to give 'voice' to the subordinated and to examine the place of culture in class power. However, this form of 'left culturalism' is also somewhat nationalistic, or at least nation-centred, in its approach. There is little sense of either the globalizing character of contemporary culture or the place of race within national and class cultures.

Structuralism

Culturalism takes meaning to be its central category and casts it as the product of active human agents. By contrast, structuralism speaks of signifying practices that generate meaning as an outcome of structures or predictable regularities that lie outside of any given person. Structuralism searches for the constraining patterns of culture and social life which lie outside of any given person. Individual acts are explained as the product of social structures. As such, structuralism is anti-humanist in its decentring of human agents from the heart of enquiry. Instead it favours a form of analysis in which phenomena have meaning only in relation to other phenomena within a systematic structure of which no particular person is the source. A structuralist understanding of culture is concerned with the 'systems of relations' of an underlying structure (usually language) and the grammar that makes meaning possible.

Deep structures of language

Structuralism in cultural studies takes signification or meaning production to be the effect of deep structures of language that are manifested in specific cultural phenomena or human speakers. However, meaning is the outcome not of the intentions of actors *per se* but of the

language itself. Thus, structuralism is concerned with how cultural meaning is generated, understanding culture to be analogous to (or structured like) a language (Chapter 3).

The work of Ferdinand de Saussure (1960) was critical in the development of structuralism. He argued that meaning is generated through a system of structured differences in language. That is, significance is the outcome of the rules and conventions that organize language (*langue*) rather than the specific uses and utterances which individuals deploy in everyday life (*parole*).

According to Saussure, meaning is produced through a process of selection and combination of signs along two axes, namely:

1 the syntagmatic (linear – e.g. a sentence);

2 the paradigmatic (a field of signs – e.g. synonyms).

The organization of signs along these axes forms a signifying system. Signs, constituted by signifiers (medium) and signifieds (meaning), do not make sense by virtue of reference to entities in an independent object world; rather, they generate meaning by reference to each other. Meaning is a social convention organized through the relations between signs.

In short, Saussure, and structuralism in general, are concerned more with the structures of language which allow linguistic performance to be possible than with actual performance in its infinite variations. Structuralism proceeds through the analysis of binaries: for example the contrast between *langue* and *parole* or between pairs of signs so that 'black' only has meaning in relation to 'white', and vice versa.

KEY THINKERS

Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913)

Saussure was a Swiss linguist whose posthumously published work laid the basis for structural linguistics or semiotics, the 'science' of signs. Saussure's influence on cultural studies comes indirectly through the work of other thinkers, like Roland Barthes, who were influenced by him. The central tenet of Saussure's argument is that language is to be understood as a sign system constituted by interrelated terms without positive values (i.e. meaning is relational). *Langue*, or the formal structure of signs, is said to be the proper subject of linguistics. Cultural studies commonly explores culture as a grammar of signs.

Reading: Saussure, F. de (1960) *Course in General Linguistics*. London: Peter Owen.

Culture as 'like a language'

Structuralism extends its reach from 'words' to the language of cultural signs in general. Thus human relations, material objects and images are all analysed through the structures of signs. In Lévi-Strauss (see Leach, 1974), we find structuralist principles at work when he describes kinship systems as 'like a language' – that is, family relations are held to be structured by the internal organization of binaries. For example, kinship patterns are structured around the incest taboo that divides people into the marriageable and the prohibited.

Typical of Lévi-Strauss's structuralism is his approach to food, which, he declares, is not so much good to eat, as good to think with. That is, food is a signifier of symbolic meanings. Cultural conventions tell us what constitutes food and what does not, the circumstances of their eating and the meanings attached to them. Lévi-Strauss tends towards the structuralist trope of binaries: the raw and the cooked, the edible and the inedible, nature and culture, each of which has meaning only in relation to its opposite. Cooking transforms nature into culture and the raw into the cooked.

The edible and the inedible are marked not by questions of nutrition but by cultural meanings. An example of this would be the Jewish prohibition against pork and the necessity to prepare food in culturally specific ways (kosher food). Here, binary oppositions of the edible–inedible mark another binary, insiders and outsiders, and hence the boundaries of the culture or social order. Later, Barthes (see Chapter 3) was to extend the structuralist account of culture to the practices of popular culture and their naturalized meanings or myths. He was to argue that the meanings of texts are to be grasped not in terms of the intentions of specific human beings but as a set of signifying practices.

In sum:

- Culturalism focuses on meaning production by human actors in a historical context.
- Structuralism points to culture as an expression of deep structures of language that lie outside of the intentions of actors and constrain them.
- Culturalism stresses history.
- Structuralism is synchronic in approach, analysing the structures of relations in a snapshot of a particular moment. As such, it asserts the specificity of culture and its irreducibility to any other phenomena.
- Culturalism focuses on interpretation as a way of understanding meaning.
- Structuralism has asserted the possibility of a science of signs and thus of objective knowledge.

Structuralism is best approached as a method of analysis rather than an all-embracing philosophy. However, the notion of stability of meaning, upon which the binaries of structuralism

and its pretensions to surety of knowledge are based, is the subject of attack by poststructuralism. That is, poststructuralism deconstructs the very notion of the stable structures of language.

Poststructuralism (and postmodernism)

The term poststructuralism implies 'after structuralism', embodying notions of both critique and absorption. That is, poststructuralism absorbs aspects of structural linguistics while subjecting it to a critique that, it is claimed, surpasses structuralism. In short, poststructuralism rejects the idea of an underlying stable structure that founds meaning through fixed binary pairs (black–white; good–bad). Rather, meaning is unstable, being always deferred and in process. Meaning cannot be confined to single words, sentences or particular texts but is the outcome of relationships between texts, that is, intertextuality. Like its predecessor, poststructuralism is anti-humanist in its decentring of the unified, coherent human subject as the origin of stable meanings.

Derrida: the instability of language

The primary philosophical sources of poststructuralism are Derrida (1976) and Foucault (1984d) (see Chapter 3). Since they give rise to different emphases, poststructuralism cannot be regarded as a unified body of work. Derrida's focus is on language and the deconstruction of an immediacy, or identity, between words and meanings.

Derrida accepts Saussure's argument that meaning is generated by relations of difference between signifiers rather than by reference to an independent object world. However, for Derrida, the consequence of this play of signifiers is that meaning can never be fixed. Words carry many meanings, including the echoes or traces of other meanings from other related words in other contexts. For example, if we look up the meaning of a word in a dictionary, we are referred to other words in an infinite process of deferral. Meaning slides down a chain of signifiers abolishing a stable signified. Thus, Derrida introduces the notion of *différance*, 'difference and deferral'. Here the production of meaning in the process of signification is continually deferred and supplemented.

Derrida proceeds to deconstruct the 'stable' binaries upon which structuralism, and indeed western philosophy in general, relies. He argues for the 'undecidability' of binary oppositions. In particular, deconstruction involves the dismantling of hierarchical conceptual oppositions such as speech/writing, reality/appearance, nature/culture, reason/madness, etc., which exclude and devalue the 'inferior' part of the binary.

For Derrida, 'we think only in signs' and there is no original meaning circulating outside of 'representation'. It is in this sense that there is nothing outside of texts or nothing but texts (by which it is *not* meant that there is no independent material world). That is, the meanings of texts are constitutive of practices.

BUDDHIST SHRINE

© Photographer: Freya Hadley

o What cultural practices take place around this Japanese Buddhist shrine?

o What is the meaning of the sign on the 'flags'? This sign was rotated and used in a different context. What meaning did it have in that context?

o What conclusion can you draw from this about the meanings of signs?

Foucault and discursive practices

Like Derrida, Foucault (1972) argues against structuralist theories of language which conceive of it as an autonomous, rule-governed system. He also opposes interpretative or hermeneutic methods that seek to disclose the hidden meanings of language. Foucault is concerned with the description and analysis of the surfaces of discourse and their effects under determinate material and historical conditions. For Foucault, discourse concerns both language and practice. The concept refers to the regulated production of knowledge through language which gives meaning to both material objects and social practices.

Discourse constructs, defines and produces the objects of knowledge in an intelligible way while at the same time excluding other ways of reasoning as unintelligible. Foucault attempts to identify the historical conditions and determining rules of the formation of regulated ways of speaking about objects, that is, discursive practices and discursive formations. He explores the circumstances under which statements are combined and regulated to form and define a distinct field of knowledge/objects requiring a particular set of concepts and delimiting a specific 'regime of truth' (i.e. what counts as truth).

For Foucault, discourse regulates not only what can be said under determinate social and cultural conditions but also who can speak, when and where. Consequently, much of his work is concerned with the historical investigation of power and the production of subjects through that power. Foucault does not formulate power as a centralized constraining force; rather, power is dispersed through all levels of a social formation and is productive of social relations and identities (i.e. generative).
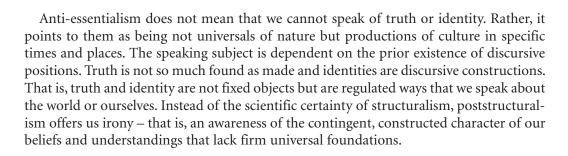
Foucault conceives of the subject as radically historized, that is, persons are wholly and only the product of history. He explores the genealogy of the body as a site of disciplinary practices that bring subjects into being. Such practices are the consequences of specific historical discourses of crime, punishment, medicine, science and sexuality. Thus, Foucault (1973) analyses statements about madness which give us knowledge about it, the rules that prescribe what is 'sayable' or 'thinkable' about madness, subjects who personify madness, and the practices within institutions that deal with madness (see Chapter 3).

Anti-essentialism

Perhaps the most significant influence of poststructuralism within cultural studies is its anti-essentialism. Essentialism assumes that words have stable referents and that social categories reflect an essential underlying identity. By this token there would be stable truths to be found and an essence of, for example, femininity or black identity. However, for poststructuralism there can be no truths, subjects or identities outside of language. Further, this is a language that does not have stable referents and is therefore unable to represent fixed truths or identities. In this sense, femininity or black identity are not fixed universal things but descriptions in language which through social convention come to be 'what counts as truth' (i.e. the temporary stabilization of meaning).

Anti-essentialism does not mean that we cannot speak of truth or identity. Rather, it points to them as being not universals of nature but productions of culture in specific times and places. The speaking subject is dependent on the prior existence of discursive positions. Truth is not so much found as made and identities are discursive constructions. That is, truth and identity are not fixed objects but are regulated ways that we speak about the world or ourselves. Instead of the scientific certainty of structuralism, poststructuralism offers us irony – that is, an awareness of the contingent, constructed character of our beliefs and understandings that lack firm universal foundations.

Postmodernism

There is no straightforward equation of poststructuralism with postmodernism, and the sharing of the prefix 'post' can lead to an unwarranted conflation of the two. However, they do share a common approach to epistemology, namely the rejection of truth as a fixed eternal object. Derrida's assertion of the instability of meaning and Foucault's awareness of the historically contingent character of truth are echoed in Jean-François Lyotard's postmodern 'incredulity towards metanarratives'. Lyotard (1984) rejects the idea of grand narratives or stories that can give us certain knowledge of the direction, meaning and moral path of human 'development'. Lyotard has in mind the teleology of Marxism, the certainty of science and the morality of Christianity.

Postmodern writers like Lyotard (1984) or Rorty (1989) share with Foucault the idea that knowledge is not metaphysical, transcendental or universal but specific to particular times and spaces. For postmodernism, knowledge is perspectival in character – that is, there can be no one totalizing knowledge that is able to grasp the 'objective' character of the world. Rather, we have and require multiple viewpoints or truths by which to interpret a complex, heterogeneous human existence. Thus, postmodernism argues that knowledge is:

- specific to language-games;
- local, plural and diverse.

One strand of postmodernism is concerned with these questions of epistemology, that is, questions of truth and knowledge. However, an equally significant body of work is centred on important cultural changes in contemporary life. Postmodern culture is said to be marked by a sense of the fragmentary, ambiguous and uncertain quality of the world, along with high levels of personal and social reflexivity. This goes hand in hand with a stress on contingency, irony and the blurring of cultural boundaries. Cultural texts are said to be typified by self-consciousness, bricolage and intertextuality. For some thinkers, postmodern culture heralds the collapse of the modern distinction between the real and simulations (see Chapter 6).

✓ Poststructuralism and postmodernism are anti-essentialist approaches that stress the constitutive role of an unstable language in the formation of cultural meaning.

Poststructuralism and postmodernism argue that subjectivity is an effect of language or discourse and also that subjects are fractured – that is, we can take up multiple subject positions offered to us in discourse. However, rather than rely on an account that stresses 'subjection' by external discourses, some writers have looked to psychoanalysis, and particularly Lacan's poststructuralist reading of Freud, for ways to think about the 'internal' constitution of subjects.

Psychoanalysis and subjectivity

Psychoanalysis is a controversial body of thought. For its supporters (Chodorow, 1978, 1989; Mitchell, 1974), its great strength lies in its rejection of the fixed nature of subjects and sexuality. That is, psychoanalysis concentrates on the construction and formation of subjectivity.

The Freudian self

According to Freud (1977), the self is constituted in terms of:

- an ego, or conscious rational mind;

- a superego, or social conscience;

- the unconscious (also known as the id), the source and repository of the symbolic workings of the mind which functions with a different logic from reason.

This structuring of the human subject is not something we are born with; rather, it is something we acquire through our relationships with our immediate 'carers'. Here the self is by definition fractured; consequently we must understand the unified narrative of the self as something we attain over time. This is said to be achieved through entry into the symbolic order of language and culture. Through processes of identification with others and with social discourses, we create an identity that embodies an illusion of wholeness.

Within Freudian theory, the libido or sexual drive does not have any pre-given fixed aim or object. Rather, through fantasy, any object, which includes persons or parts of bodies, can be the target of desire. Consequently, an almost infinite number of sexual objects and practices are within the domain of human sexuality. However, Freud's work is concerned with documenting and explaining the regulation and repression of this 'polymorphous perversity' through the resolution (or not) of the Oedipus complex into 'normal' heterosexual gendered relationships.

The Oedipus complex

In classical Freudian thought, the Oedipus complex marks the formation of the ego and of gendered subjectivity. Prior to the Oedipal moment, we are unable to distinguish clearly between ourselves and other objects and nor do we have a sense of ourselves as male or female. An infant's first love-object is its mother, whom it both identifies with and desires. That is, the child wants both to 'be' the mother and to 'possess' the mother. The resolution of the Oedipus complex involves the repudiation of the mother as a love-object and the separation of the subject from the mother.

For boys, the incest taboo, symbolized by the power of the father as Phallus, means that desire for the mother is untenable and threatened by punishment in the form of castration. As a consequence, boys shift their identification from the mother to the father and take on masculinity and heterosexuality as the desirable subject form. For girls, the separation from the mother is more complex and arguably never completed. Girls do not entirely repudiate mother identification nor do they take on father identification. However, they do recognize the power of the Phallus as something which they do not have (penis envy) but which the father does. Since they do not have a penis (or symbolic Phallus), and thus cannot ever 'be' it, they cannot identify with it. However, they can set out to possess it. This they do by seeking to have a child by the father or, more accurately, other men who stand in for the father as Phallus.

Psychoanalysis can be understood to be an ahistorical universal account of subjectivity marking the psychic processes of humankind across history. Furthermore, for many critics it is inherently patriarchal and phallocentric. As such it has proved to be unacceptable within cultural studies. However, sympathetic critics have suggested that psychoanalysis can be reworked as an historically contingent account of subject formation – that is, one that describes it only under specific historical circumstances. Changes in the cultural and symbolic order are said to lead to changes in subject formation, and vice versa. The subversiveness of psychoanalysis would then lie in its disruption of the social order, including gendered relations, by trying to bring new kinds of thinking and subjectivities into being. Thus, psychoanalysis could, it is argued, be stripped of its phallocentrism and be made appropriate to the political project of feminism (Chapter 9).

The politics of difference: feminism, race and postcolonial theory

A theme of structuralism and poststructuralism is the idea that meaning is generated through the play of difference down a chain of signifiers. Subjects are formed through difference, so that what we are is constituted in part by what we are not.

✓ There has been a growing emphasis on difference in the cultural field, and in particular on questions of gender, race and nationality.

Feminism

Feminism (Chapter 9) is a field of theory and politics that contains competing perspectives and prescriptions for action. However, in general terms, we may locate feminism as asserting that sex is a fundamental and irreducible axis of social organization which, to date, has subordinated women to men. Thus, feminism is centrally concerned with sex as an organizing principle of social life where gender relations are thoroughly saturated with power. The subordination of women is argued to be evident across a range of social institutions and practices; that is, male power and female subordination are structural. This has led some feminists to adopt the concept of patriarchy, with its derivative meanings of the male-headed family, 'mastery' and superiority.

Liberal feminism stresses equality of opportunity for women. This is held to be achievable within the broad structures of the existing legal and economic frameworks. In contrast, socialist feminists point to the interconnections between class and gender, including the fundamental place of gender inequalities in the reproduction of capitalism. Instead of liberal and socialist feminism's stress on equality and sameness, difference or radical feminism asserts essential differences between men and women. These are celebrated as representing the creative difference of women and the superiority of 'feminine' values.
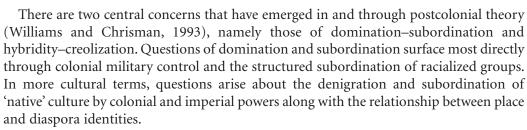
Problems with patriarchy   A criticism of the concept of patriarchy is its treatment of the category of 'woman' as undifferentiated. That is, all women are taken to share something fundamental in common; in contrast to all men. This is an assumption continually challenged by black feminists, amongst others, who have argued that the movement has defined women as white and overlooked the differences between black and white women's experiences. This stress on difference is shared by poststructuralist and postmodern feminists who argue that sex and gender are social and cultural constructions, which cannot be adequately explained in terms of biology or reduced to functions of capitalism. This is an anti-essentialist stance which argues that femininity and masculinity are not essential universal categories but discursive constructions. That is, gender is constituted by the way we talk about and perform it. As such, poststructuralist feminism is concerned with the cultural construction of subjectivity per se and with a range of possible masculinities and femininities.

Race, ethnicity and hybridity

Another 'politics of difference' which has received increasing attention within cultural studies is that of race and ethnicity in postcolonial times (see Chapters 8 and 14). Ethnicity is a cultural concept centred on norms, values, beliefs, cultural symbols and practices that mark a process of cultural boundary formation. The idea of 'racialization' has been deployed to illustrate the argument that race is a social construction and not a universal or essential category of either biology or culture. Races do not exist outside of representation but are formed in and by it in a process of social and political power struggle.

There are two central concerns that have emerged in and through postcolonial theory (Williams and Chrisman, 1993), namely those of domination–subordination and hybridity–creolization. Questions of domination and subordination surface most directly through colonial military control and the structured subordination of racialized groups. In more cultural terms, questions arise about the denigration and subordination of 'native' culture by colonial and imperial powers along with the relationship between place and diaspora identities.

The question of hybridity or creolization points to the fact that neither the colonial nor colonized cultures and languages can be presented in a 'pure' form. Inseparable from each other, they give rise to forms of hybridity. In metropolitan cultures like America and Britain, this concept is reworked to include the hybrid cultures produced by, for example, Latino-Americans and British Asians.

THE NEW CULTURAL STUDIES PROJECT

Hall and Birchall's edited book *New Cultural Studies: Adventures in Theory* (2006) makes the claim that there is a 'new' wave of cultural studies. In particular they are interested in the place of theory in cultural studies. They do this by presenting the work of what they argue is a 'post-Birmingham-School' generation of cultural studies writers such as Neil Badmington (writing about posthumanism); Caroline Bassett (writing about digital cultures); Dave Boothroyd (writing on drugs); Jeremy Gilbert (writing about anti-capitalist politics); and Joanna Zylinska (writing about bioethics in the age of new media), amongst a number of other writers.
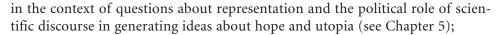
They also explore the work of thinkers who influenced and informed the 'new' cultural studies. Here a decidedly 'old' list of philosophers appears including Deleuze, Laclau, Agamben, Bataille, Zizek and others. So what is 'new' here is the use to which these philosophers are put by the latest wave of cultural studies writers, as Hall and Birchall see it.

The writing of the new cultural studies as presented in the volume is disparate and not easily lumped together. It is hard to see, in many ways, how this adds up to something that could be seen as a coherent new project. There does seem to be a touch of hype about the book's title. That said, some thematic strands do emerge:

- theorists trying to conceive of democracy and politics in new ways using the work of Laclau and Mouffe, Deleuze, Agamben and Luhmann, in which ideas drawn from Marxism and materialism are prominent (see Chapter 14);

- theorists that challenge the intersection between human and non-human or not-human; between nature (biology) and culture (technology/science) and between human/animal. Key theorists here include Haraway, Ihde, and Latour. A key theme is the convergence of culture and science in which science is understood

in the context of questions about representation and the political role of scientific discourse in generating ideas about hope and utopia (see Chapter 5);

- theorists that are trying to conceive notions of subjectivity and identity in new ways, drawing upon philosophers like Deleuze, Ihde and Zizek. In particular, questions are raised about what is human and whether, for example, a genetic code can be held to be intellectual property or whether non-human animals should be granted 'human rights' (as in Spain where apes have been given such rights) (see Chapter 7);

- theorists who are interested in the role of bodies and affect in politics and identity. In particular the place of fear and hope are given prominence (see Chapter 4);

- theorists trying to find a road between science, ontology and social construction. The core theme seems to be to avoiding the essentialist humanist subject while trying to preserve notions of truth, evolution and biology (see Chapter 3).

The website that accompanies the book, *New Cultural Studies: The Liquid Theory Reader*, does try to add a new dimension to theory building by publishing as a wiki. This means that readers can add to and amend the published content. Theory or 'the theorist' is then a collective thread rather than a set entity. Book chapters are then transposed into hard copies at intervals. That said, there had not been much new activity when the site was visited in 2010 when researching for *Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice* so it is not clear (to me) how successful this novel idea has been.

CENTRAL PROBLEMS IN CULTURAL STUDIES

Over the past 30 years or so, cultural studies has developed to a stage where similar problems, issues and debates have emerged from within the literature. A 'problem' in cultural studies is constituted by a field of recurrent doubts and puzzles in the literature. Although such problems are discussed throughout this book it is worth crystallizing some of the key points at this stage.

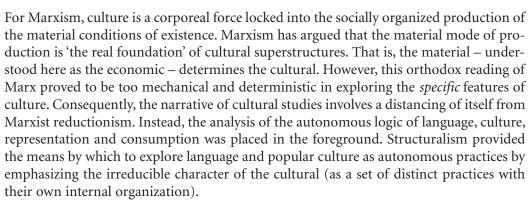### Language and the material

A long-running debate within cultural studies concerns the relationship between culture as signification and culture as material. This debate is located in the triangular confrontation between:

1 the legacy of Marxism within cultural studies;

2 the development of an anti-reductionist strain within cultural studies;

3 the recent ascendancy of poststructuralism.

For Marxism, culture is a corporeal force locked into the socially organized production of the material conditions of existence. Marxism has argued that the material mode of production is 'the real foundation' of cultural superstructures. That is, the material – understood here as the economic – determines the cultural. However, this orthodox reading of Marx proved to be too mechanical and deterministic in exploring the *specific* features of culture. Consequently, the narrative of cultural studies involves a distancing of itself from Marxist reductionism. Instead, the analysis of the autonomous logic of language, culture, representation and consumption was placed in the foreground. Structuralism provided the means by which to explore language and popular culture as autonomous practices by emphasizing the irreducible character of the cultural (as a set of distinct practices with their own internal organization).

Some critics have felt that cultural studies has gone too far in its assertion of the autonomy of culture and has abandoned political economy. Although this argument has some merit, it is not the case in the multiperspectival approach offered by Hall et al.'s 'circuit of culture' (see Figure 2.2 on p. 61). Here a full analysis of any cultural practice requires a discussion of both 'economy' and 'culture' and an articulation of the relations between them.

The textual character of culture

The machinery and operations of language are central concerns for cultural studies. Indeed, the investigation of culture has often been regarded as virtually interchangeable with the exploration of meaning produced symbolically through signifying systems that work 'like a language'. This turn to studying language within cultural studies represents a major intellectual gain and research achievement. It has also involved some partial sightedness.

Most students of cultural studies are aware that culture can be read as a text, using concepts like signification, code or discourse. However, an emphasis on structuralist and poststructuralist accounts of signification has sometimes led cultural studies to reify language as a 'thing' or 'system' rather than grasp it as a social practice. The danger here is a kind of textual determinism. That is, textual subject positions are held to be indistinguishable from, and constitutive of, speaking subjects. The living, embodied speaking and acting subject may be lost from view.

The metaphor of culture as 'like a language' has a great deal to recommend it. However, there is also much to be gained by describing culture in terms of practices, routines and spatial arrangements. Not only is language always embedded in practice, but also all practices signify. Further, the identification of textual codes and subject positions does not guarantee that the proscribed meanings are 'taken up' by concrete persons in daily life (see Ang, 1985; Morley, 1992). In sum, the study of language is absolutely critical to cultural studies as an ongoing project while possessing limitations.

> **Name three different types of cultural text.**
>
> – What are the common elements that make up a cultural text?
> – What different features of each of the three texts can you identify?
> – Can you distinguish any differences between a text and a practice?

The location of culture

For Raymond Williams (1981, 1983) culture is located, to all intents and purposes, within flexible but identifiable boundaries. That is, culture is understood to be a facet of place. Indeed it is constitutive of place. In so far as culture is a common whole way of life, its boundaries are largely locked into those of nationality and ethnicity, that is, the culture of, for example, the English or perhaps the British. However, globalization has made the idea of culture as a whole way of life located within definite boundaries increasingly problematic.

In particular, that which is considered to be local is produced within and by globalizing discourses. These include global corporate marketing strategies that orient themselves to differentiated 'local' markets. Much that is considered to be local, and counterpoised to the global is the outcome of translocal processes (Robertson, 1992). Place is now forged globally by virtue of the movement of cultural elements from one location to another. For example, population movement and electronic communications have enabled increased cultural juxtapostioning, meeting and mixing. These developments suggest the need to escape from a model of culture as a locally bounded 'whole way of life'.

The processes of globalization suggest that we need to rethink our conception of culture. Culture is not best understood in terms of locations and roots but more as hybrid and creolized cultural routes in global space.
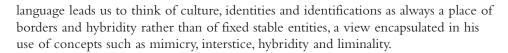

KEY THINKERS

Homi K. Bhabha (1949–)

Homi Bhabha was born in India and educated at Bombay University and Christ Church College, Oxford. He is currently Professor in the Humanities at the University of Chicago, where he teaches in the departments of English and Art. Strongly influenced by poststructuralism, Bhabha argues against the tendency to essentialize 'Third World' countries into a homogeneous identity, claiming instead that all sense of nationhood is narrativized. For Bhabha, the instability of meaning in

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> language leads us to think of culture, identities and identifications as always a place of borders and hybridity rather than of fixed stable entities, a view encapsulated in his use of concepts such as mimicry, interstice, hybridity and liminality.
>
> *Reading*: Bhabha, H. (1994) *The Location of Culture*. London and New York: Routledge.

Yet there remains a value in locating culture in-place in order to be able to say things like 'this is a valued and meaningful practice in Australian culture' or that the cultural flows of the 'Black Atlantic' involve musical forms of 'West African origin'. The *duality of culture* lies in its being both 'in-place' and of 'no-place'.

Consider what kind of a place you call 'home'.

– What feelings do you associate with 'home'?
– What symbols, practices and emotions give 'home' meaning and significance for you?

Consider the phrase 'homeland'.

– What are the elements that give this term meaning for you?
– How many of the symbols and practices associated with your homeland originated from outside of its borders?

How is cultural change possible?

Cultural studies writers have consistently identified the examination of culture, power and politics as central to the domain. Indeed, cultural studies can be understood as a body of theory generated by thinkers who regard the production of theoretical knowledge as a political practice. Many cultural studies writers have wanted to link their work with political movements. This followed the model of the 'organic' intellectuals, who were said to be the thinking and organizing elements of the counter-hegemonic class and its allies.

However, there is little evidence to suggest that cultural studies writers have ever been 'organically' connected with political movements in any significant way. Rather, as Hall (1992a) has commented, cultural studies intellectuals acted 'as if' they were organic intellectuals, or in the hope that one day they could be. Originally cultural studies writers imagined themselves organically linked to revolutionary class factions. Later, as class declined as a political vehicle and socialism receded as an immediate goal, New Social Movements (NSMs) took on the mantle of political agents. However, cultural studies has not been especially successful in forging links with such movements either.

Indeed, there is little evidence of popular support for radical political change in the west at all, let alone 'cultural revolution'. Reform seems to be the only possible way to move forward within western liberal democracies. This does not mean that we have to accept liberal democracy as it stands. On the contrary, one of our aims must be to push for the extension of democratic practices within the liberal democratic framework. This has led some in the field to argue for cultural policy that is specifically and carefully targeted with a clear sense of the intended outcomes and mechanisms of transformation.

Rationality and its limits

Western cultures mostly assume that human life is explicable in terms of the rational choices of individual actors. Rational action is that which can be justified within a specific cultural context. Cultural studies would not want to adopt the notion of the rational actor who calculates the means to maximize his or her interests. Nevertheless, there has been an implicit assumption that rationality could provide logical explanations for cultural phenomena. For example, a common assumption has been that racism and sexism would dwindle in the face of rational argument.

Often absent from cultural studies are the non-linear, non-rational and emotionally driven aspects of human behaviour. The exception to this observation is the import of psychoanalysis into the field. For example, Hall (1990, 1992b, 1996a) and Butler (1993) have profitably explored Lacanian psychoanalysis and the processes by which our psychic identifications, or emotional investments, are attached to disciplinary discourses. Yet psychoanalysis has its own problems, not least its phallocentrism and spurious claims to being an objective science (see Chapters 2 and 9). But still, there are very good reasons why cultural studies as a discipline needs to further develop issues of affect and emotion. Many of the horrors of our world are driven by emotional responses and social change is never going to be a simple matter of argument and analysis.

A range of postmodern thinkers has criticized the impulses of modern rationality. They argue that it brings us not so much progress as domination and oppression. The very impulse to control nature through science and rationality is, it is argued, an impulse to control and dominate human beings. This is an instrumental rationality whose logic leads not only to industrialization but also to concentration camps.
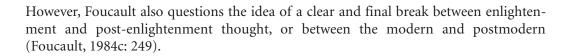
Foucault, for example, argues that:

- knowledge is not metaphysical, transcendental or universal;
- knowledge is a matter of perspective;
- knowledge is not pure or neutral but is always from a point of view;
- knowledge is itself implicated in regimes of power.

However, Foucault also questions the idea of a clear and final break between enlightenment and post-enlightenment thought, or between the modern and postmodern (Foucault, 1984c: 249).

The character of truth

How can we ground or justify cultural theory and cultural politics? This is one of the central problems of cultural studies. For modernists, the adoption of a realist epistemology has allowed writers and researchers to make universal truth claims. It follows that once we know the truth about the workings of the social world, then we can intervene strategically in human affairs with confidence. All the social sciences, from sociology to economics and psychology, were founded on the premise that conceptual and empirical truth can be discovered.

However, realist epistemologies have largely been displaced within cultural studies. This is a consequence of the influence of poststructuralism, postmodernism and other anti-representationalist paradigms. These widely accepted (within cultural studies) strands of thinking have undermined the notion of objective and universal truth.

For the philosopher Nietzsche (1968) truth is expressed in language so that sentences are the only things that can be true or false. Truth is a 'mobile army of metaphors and metonyms'. An acculturated authority arbitrates between these sentences. Thus 'truth' is a question of whose interpretations count as truth. Truth is embroiled in power. Foucault (1972, 1973), whose work was greatly informed by Nietzsche, argues that different epistemes, or configurations of knowledge, shape the practices and social order of specific historical periods. In place of Truth, Foucault speaks instead about particular 'regimes of truth'. Similarly, Rorty (1980, 1989) argues that all truth is culture-bound and specific to times and places. Knowledge and values are located in time, space and social power. To argue that all knowledge is positional or culture-bound is not to embrace relativism. Relativism would imply the ability to see across different forms of knowledge and to conclude that they are of equal value. Instead, as Rorty argues, we are always positioned within acculturated knowledge. There is no final vocabulary of language that is 'true' in the sense of accurately picturing an independent object world called reality. Our vocabularies are only final in the sense of currently being without a tenable challenge. Thus, our best bet is to go on telling stories about ourselves that aim to achieve the most valued description and arrangement of human actions and institutions.

QUESTIONS OF METHODOLOGY

Cultural studies has not paid much attention to the classical questions of research methods and methodology. Thus, methodological texts by Alasuutari (1995), McGuigan (1997b) and Gray (2003) are exceptions to the rule. Further, most of the debates in cultural

studies have not been concerned with the technicalities of method but with the philosophical approaches that underpin them; that is, methodology. The most significant methodological debates within cultural studies have centred on the status of knowledge and truth, as discussed above. These are issues of epistemology, or the philosophy of knowledge. As we have seen, the realist argument is that a degree of certain knowledge about an independent object world (a real world) is possible even though methodological vigilance and reflexivity need to be maintained. Within cultural studies this point of view has more often than not appeared in a quasi-Marxist guise. In contrast, for poststructuralists knowledge is not a question of discovering objective and accurate truth but of constructing interpretations about the world which are 'taken to be true'.

Key methodologies in cultural studies

Despite disputes about the status of knowledge, it is reasonably clear which methods are most widely deployed within cultural studies, though researchers disagree about their relative merits. We may start with the standard methodological distinction between quantitative and qualitative research methods. That is, between, respectively, methods that centre on numbers and the counting of things (e.g. statistics and surveys) and those that concentrate on the meanings generated by actors gathered through participant observation, interviews, focus groups and textual analysis. On the whole, cultural studies has favoured qualitative methods with their focus on cultural meaning.

Work in cultural studies has centred on three kinds of approach:

1 *ethnography*, which has often been linked with culturalist approaches and a stress on 'lived experience';

2 a range of *textual* approaches, which have tended to draw from semiotics, poststructuralism and Derridean deconstruction;

3 a series of *reception* studies, which are eclectic in their theoretical roots.

Ethnography

Ethnography is an empirical and theoretical approach inherited from anthropology which seeks a detailed holistic description and analysis of cultures based on intensive fieldwork. In classical conceptions, 'the Ethnographer participates in people's lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983: 2). The objective is to produce what Geertz famously described as 'thick descriptions' of 'the multiplicity of complex conceptual structures' (1973: 10). This would include the unspoken and taken-for-granted assumptions that operate within cultural life. Ethnography concentrates on the details of local life while connecting them to wider social processes.

Ethnographic cultural studies has been centred on the qualitative exploration of values and meanings in the context of a 'whole way of life' – that is, ethnography has been deployed in order to explore questions about cultures, life-worlds and identities. As Morley remarks, 'qualitative research strategies such as ethnography are principally designed to gain access to "naturalized domains" and their characteristic activities' (1992: 186). However, in the context of media-oriented cultural studies, ethnography has become a code-word for a range of qualitative methods, including participant observation, in-depth interviews and focus groups. Here, it is the 'spirit' of ethnography (i.e. a qualitative understanding of cultural activity in context) which is invoked polemically against the tradition of quantitative communications research.

The problem of representation   Ethnography has tried to 'represent the subjective meanings, feelings and cultures of others' (Willis, 1980: 91). In this way, ethnography has relied on an implicitly realist epistemology. This assumption that it is possible to represent in a naturalistic way the 'real' experience of people has been the subject of considerable critique.

- First, it is argued that the data presented by ethnographers are always already an interpretation made through that person's eyes. That is, interpretation is not objective but rather is positional. However, this is an argument that can be directed at all forms of research. Here it simply gives rise to 'interpretative ethnography'.

- Second, there has been a brand of more telling postmodern critique. Here, in addition to pointing to the problems of realist epistemology, it is argued that ethnography is a genre of writing that deploys rhetorical devices, often obscured, to maintain its realist claims (Clifford and Marcus, 1986). In other words, the products of ethnography are always texts.

Clifford poses the second issue thus:

> If ethnography produces interpretations through intense research experiences, how is unruly experience transformed into an authoritative written account? How, precisely, is a garrulous, overdetermined cross-cultural encounter shot through with power relations and personal cross-purposes circumscribed as an adequate version of a more or less discrete 'other world' composed by an individual author? (1988: 25)

This argument leads to the examination of ethnographic texts for their rhetorical devices. It also suggests the need for a more reflexive and dialogical approach to ethnography which demands that writers elaborate on their own assumptions, views and positions. Further, consultation with the 'subjects' of ethnography is required so that ethnography

becomes less an expedition in search of 'the facts' and more a conversation between participants in a research process.

The critique of the epistemological claims of ethnography does not mean that it is of no value or that it should be abandoned. There is no fundamental epistemological distinction between ethnography and a multi-layered novel. For both, the purposes do not lie in the production of a 'true' picture of the world but in the production of empathy and the widening of the circle of human solidarity (Rorty, 1989). Thus, ethnography has personal, poetic and political, rather than epistemological, justifications.

In this view, ethnographic data can be seen as giving poetic expression to voices from other cultures or from the 'margins' of our own cultures. However, representing such voices is no longer to be regarded as a 'scientific' report. Rather, it is to be understood as a poetic exposition and narration that bring new voices into what Rorty calls the 'cosmopolitan conversation of humankind'. Thus, ethnographic data can be the route by which our own culture is made strange to us, allowing new descriptions of the world to be generated. For example, ethnographic research may help us to learn from other cultures, to supply those 'toeholds for new initiatives' and 'tensions which make people listen to unfamiliar ideas' which combat ethnocentrism and help enrich our own culture with new ideas (Rorty, 1989).
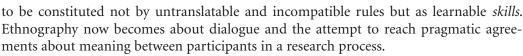
None of this means that we can abandon all methodological rigour, for the following reasons:

1　Evidence and poetic style are pragmatically useful warrants for truth and action, epistemologically equivalent to the procedural agreements of the physical sciences. That is, scientific 'objectivity' is to be read as social solidarity and truth signals maximum social agreement (Rorty, 1991a).

2　The language of observation and evidence are among the conventions that divide the genre of ethnography from the novel.

3　The rejection of a universal objective truth is based on the impossibility of word–world correspondence and therefore of accurate or adequate representation. This does not mean that we have to abandon word–word translation. That is, we can achieve 'good enough' reporting of the speech or action of others without making claims to universal truth. Thus, it is better to use a tape recorder to document the utterances of research subjects rather than make it up because:

(a)　we will be better able to translate and understand the words of others for practical purposes;

(b)　we will be better able to predict the actions of others.

The problems of ethnography are problems of translation and justification rather than of universal or objective truth. We can consider languages (and thus culture and knowledge)

to be constituted not by untranslatable and incompatible rules but as learnable *skills*. Ethnography now becomes about dialogue and the attempt to reach pragmatic agreements about meaning between participants in a research process.

I have discussed ethnography at greater length than I am about to devote to textual and reception studies, for two reasons. First, ethnography raises crucial epistemological issues that are relevant and, to a degree, generalizable to other methods. That is, questions about realism, interpretation and representation are also applicable to textual and reception methodology. Second, the vast majority of 'evidence' provided in this book comes from textual, reception or theoretical work. It thus seemed reasonable to devote more space here to the somewhat neglected strand of ethnographic cultural studies.

Textual approaches

Although textual work comes in many guises, including 'literary criticism', the three outstanding modes of analysis in cultural studies draw from:

- semiotics;
- narrative theory;
- deconstructionism.

Texts as signs   Semiotics explores how the meanings generated by texts have been achieved through a particular arrangement of signs and cultural codes (Chapter 3). Such analysis draws attention to the ideologies or myths of texts. For example, semiotic analysis illustrates the case that television news is a constructed representation and not a mirror of reality (Chapter 10). The media's selective and value-laden representations are not 'accurate' pictures of the world. Rather, they are best understood as the site of struggles over what counts as meaning and truth. Television may appear to be 'realistic' because of its use of seamless editing and the 'invisible' cut. However, such realism is constituted by a set of aesthetic conventions rather than being a reflection of the 'real world'.

Texts as narratives   Texts tell stories, whether that is Einstein's theory of relativity, Hall's theory of identity, or the latest episode of *The Simpsons*. Consequently, narrative theory plays a part in cultural studies. A narrative is an ordered sequential account that makes claims to be a record of events. Narratives are the structured form in which stories advance explanations for the ways of the world. Narratives offer us

frameworks of understanding and rules of reference about the way the social order is constructed. In doing so they supply answers to the question: How shall we live?

Stories take different forms and utilize a variety of characters, subject matters and narrative structures (or ways of telling a story). However, structuralist theory has concerned itself with the common features of story formation. According to Todorov (1977), narrative minimally concerns the disruption of an equilibrium and the tracing of the consequences of said disruption until a new equilibrium is achieved. For example, an established soap opera couple are shown in a loving embrace as a prelude to the later revelation that one of them is having an affair. The question is posed: Will this spell the end of the relationship? A good deal of talk, emotion and explanation takes place before the characters are either reconciled or go their separate ways. Soap opera is the name of a genre. Genres structure the narrative process and contain it; they regulate it in particular ways using specific elements and combinations of elements to produce coherence and credibility. Genre thus represents systemizations and repetitions of problems and solutions in narratives (Neale, 1980).

Deconstruction   Deconstructionism is associated with Derrida's 'undoing' of the binaries of western philosophy and the extension of this procedure into the fields of literature (e.g. De Man) and postcolonial theory (e.g. Spivak). To deconstruct is to take apart, to undo, in order to seek out and display the assumptions of a text. In particular, deconstruction involves the dismantling of hierarchical conceptual oppositions such as man/woman, black/white, reality/appearance, nature/culture, reason/madness, etc. Such binaries are said to 'guarantee' truth by excluding and devaluing the 'inferior' part of the binary. Thus, speech is privileged over writing, reality over appearance, men over women.

The purpose of deconstruction is not simply to reverse the order of binaries but to show that they are implicated in each other. Deconstruction seeks to expose the blindspots of texts, the unacknowledged assumptions upon which they operate. This includes the places where a text's rhetorical strategies work against the logic of a text's arguments. That is, the deconstruction seeks to expose the tension between what a text means to say and what it is constrained to mean.

One of the central problems faced by the process of deconstruction is that it must use the very conceptual language it seeks to undo. For example, to deconstruct western philosophy is to use the very language of western philosophy. To mark this tension, Derrida places his concepts under erasure. To place a word under erasure is first to write the word and then to cross it out, leaving both the word and its crossed-out version. As Spivak explains: 'Since the word is inaccurate, it is crossed out. Since it is necessary, it remains legible' (1976: xiv). The use 'under erasure' of accustomed and known concepts is intended to destabilize the familiar. As such it marks it as useful, necessary, inaccurate and mistaken. Thus does Derrida seek to illuminate the undecidability of meaning.

Reception studies

Exponents of reception or consumption studies argue that whatever analysis of textual meanings a critic may undertake, it is far from certain which of the identified meanings, if any, will be activated by actual readers/audiences/consumers. By this is meant that audiences are active creators of meaning in relation to texts. They bring previously acquired cultural competencies to bear on texts so that differently constituted audiences will work with different meanings.

On the theoretical front, two fields of study have proved to be particularly influential: first, Hall's (1981) 'Encoding–Decoding' model; and, second, hermeneutic and literary reception studies. Hall argues that the production of meaning does not ensure consumption of that meaning as the encoders might have intended. This is so because (television) messages, constructed as a sign system with multi-accentuated components, are polysemic. That is, they have more than one potential set of meanings. To the degree that audiences participate in cultural frameworks with producers, then audience decodings and textual encodings will be similar. However, where audience members are situated in different social positions (e.g. of class and gender) from encoders, and thus have divergent cultural resources available to them, they will be able to decode programmes in alternative ways.

Work within the tradition of hermeneutics and literary reception studies (Gadamer, 1976; Iser, 1978) argues that understanding is always from the position and point of view of the person who understands. This involves not merely a reproduction of textual meaning but the *production* of meaning by the readers. The text may structure aspects of meaning by guiding the reader, but it cannot fix the meaning. Rather, significance is the outcome of the oscillations between the text and the imagination of the reader (Chapter 10).

The place of theory

A significant strand of work in cultural studies is not empirical but theoretical.

> ✓ Theory can be understood as narratives that seek to distinguish and account for general features which describe, define and explain persistently perceived occurrences.

Theory does not picture the world more or less accurately; rather, it is a tool, instrument or logic for intervening in the world. This is achieved through the mechanisms of description, definition, prediction and control. Theory construction is a self-reflexive discursive endeavour that seeks to interpret and intercede in the world.

Theory construction involves the thinking through of concepts and arguments, often redefining and critiquing prior work, with the objective of offering new ways to think

about our world. Thus, theoretical concepts are tools for thinking. This process has maintained a high-profile position within cultural studies. Theoretical work can be thought of as a crafting of the cultural signposts and maps by which we are guided. Cultural studies has rejected the empiricist claim that knowledge is simply a matter of collecting facts from which theory can be deduced or tested against. Rather, theory is always already implicit in empirical research through the very choice of topic, the focus the research takes, and the concepts through which it is discussed and interpreted. That is, 'facts' are not neutral and no amount of stacking up of 'facts' produces a story about our lives without theory. Indeed, theory is precisely a story about humanity with implications for action and judgements about consequences.

SUMMARY

Cultural studies:

- is a plural field of contesting perspectives which through the production of theory has sought to intervene in cultural politics;
- explores culture as the signifying practices of representation within the context of social power;
- draws on a variety of theories, including Marxism, structuralism, poststructuralism and feminism;
- is eclectic in its methods;
- asserts the positionality of all knowledge, including its own;
- coheres conceptually around the key ideas of culture, signifying practices, representation, discourse, power, articulation, texts, readers and consumption;
- is an interdisciplinary or post-disciplinary field of enquiry which explores the production and inculcation of maps of meaning;
- can be described as a language-game or discursive formation concerned with issues of power in the signifying practices of human life.

Above all, cultural studies is an exciting and fluid project that tells us stories about our changing world in the hope that we can improve it.