CULTURE and SOCIETY

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An Introduction to Cultural Studies

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Acknowledgements

In the south east of Brazil, in the state of Minas Gerais, in the small town of Ponte Nova beneath the mountains, a boy grows up in an Arab community, listening to the sound of Lebanese voices, singing the mass in an old, local Catholic church. In his youth he gets interested in jazz and bossa nova. In 1970, at the age of 24, João Bosco meets the carioca poet Aldir Blanc and they start playing samba, boleros, a mix of Latin, Caribbean and African music. One of the songs they create is a beautiful tune called 'O Mestre Sala dos Mares' (The Master of Ceremonies of the Seas) (1975). The song talks of a 'black navigator' visiting various ports. His audience – a fusion of cultures, 'races' and ethnicities – come alive in the music and dance of the carnival.

The song was originally written as a homage to the black sailor, João Candido, who led the Chibata rebellion (or the revolt against 'the whip') of 1910. Many of the sailors in the Brazilian navy were black, in contrast to the whiteness of the officer class. Candido led a mutiny against the maltreatment of the sailors and in particular against the severe beating of a friend on his ship, *Minais Gerais* (named after the state in which Bosco was to be born). The rebellion spread and Candido called on the Brazilian president and the naval establishment to cease using the chibata as a means of discipline. Fearing an attack on the republic, an amnesty was negotiated, but many of the sailors, once having given up their arms, were slaughtered and João Candido was exiled to the Amazon. He finally went crazy and died selling fish in Rio De Janeiro.

'O Mestre Sala dos Mares' was written by Bosco and Blanc during the dictatorship in Brazil. The original lyrics talked of the whip and the revolt and it was initially titled the 'Black Admiral'. But the Brazilian naval establishment were still smarting and the lyrics and title were censored. Words that easily signified the original event – such as 'revolt' and 'blood' – were replaced by the songwriters with ones that give the song a surreal tone: 'Glory to the

pirates, the mulattos, the sereias, Glory to farofa, cachaça, the whales'. The song now talked of the orchestration of a carnival dance and the navigation of the sea. The black admiral, now referred to elliptically as the 'black navigator', directs the dancing at the carnival. The song – formed as it is through the overlapping genealogies of 'race', colonisation, enslavement, gender and sexuality – emerged at a politically turbulent time in contemporary Brazil and reminds us not to forget 'our history', a history that is hybrid, vibrant and formed in resistance. Culture matters.

One hundred and thirty-five years before, Frederick Douglass (who the cultural theorist Paul Gilroy states as having been known for talking 'sailor like an old salt' (1993a)) had been sailing with Irish crew on Baltimore Clippers and had given his first public abolitionist speech to a white audience in the late 1830s in the Athenaeum library in Nantucket, a largely Quaker dominated island, 24 miles off the coast of New England. From Nantucket, a fleet of more than 70 whaling ships sailed the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans, hunting the great mammals for blubber to process into oils for industry, cooking and lighting. In the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries it was a major economy, not just for the island, but also for the north American and other outposts of an emerging network of industry and trade. In the late eighteenth century, the white colonisers drew on the native Wampanoag Indians as oarsmen for the boats, but by the nineteenth century the crew was more mixed with sailors from further afield, from Boston and other towns on the mainland. Nearly ten years before Douglass gave his speech, an almost all-black crew had returned in 1830 from a voyage of over 14 months with 2,280 barrels of oil and the local newspaper declared that it was the 'GREATEST VOYAGE EVER MADE' (Philbrick, 2001). Such a journey was to be compared with the earlier and more fateful one for which the island is now better known – the voyage of the *Essex*. The journey that took a mixed-race crew from the north American coast to the tip of the south Americas, to be rammed, west of the Galapagos and north of the Marquesas islands, by a sperm whale of biblical proportions. The largely white survivors, who made it back to safety, three months after the *Essex* had been sunk and after much hardship and cannibalism of their fellow crewmates, had some of their story told in various reports, newspaper articles and in Herman Melville's great US novel, *Moby Dick*. What is striking for us about this event is not only the horror and violence, but also the faith and hope that is encoded in such stories of different 'peoples', communities, species, materials, technologies, and journeys. Culture matters.

As I write the opening words to this book on culture, I'm listening to Bosco on my CD player, with a book about the history of the Nantucket whalers to one side and a copy of Gilroy's fabulous text, *The Black Atlantic*

on the other. In the long history of the Atlantic and beyond, these peoples, arts and work are set in the context of slavery, the movement and settlement of Europeans and the colonisation of native American Indian lands, and the diaspora of peoples of African descent across a huge geography. A movement of women, men and children, ideas, arts and influences. A movement of cultures. And, although a numbers of threads link these stories together (empire, sailing, and the sea), their particular genealogies, in many ways, have little in common. Across the different peoples of Ponte Nova and Nantucket, across the different forms of expression from literature to song, and across the different religions, politics, daily struggles and imagined futures, we happily refer to particular styles of music, to the lived experiences of workers, and to the conflict between people as 'cultural'. Moreover, we use the term *culture* not only to refer to things different in form or distant in place, but also to events and happenings across large stretches of time. Thus, we quite happily refer to a song from the 1970s and a book from 1851 with the same term, 'culture'. I say this not in order to dismiss the term 'culture' as too broad and general to take account properly of all the detail and distinction across these different cases, but to stand back in amazement at how well the category 'culture' allows us to hold these differences up for inspection, without ever making the assumption that the differences are reducible to one and the same thing; the deaths of a boatload of black sailors is not the same as a story of a whale. Having said this though, we should be wary of assuming that the meaning of the term culture has itself remained constant over those 100 or so years. Just as the world changes over time and place, so too does the meaning of a word and the use to which it is put.

This said, we might also wonder whether 'culture' is not only a category or an idea, but also something substantive, something material. If we are to talk about the pleasures of listening to a song or the hardship of living in a whaling community as 'cultural', then do we mean that a culture is tangible, malleable and affective? In a very real sense, songs and stories only travel and find their way across space and time because they are carried alongside other materials. In the satchel of a solitary traveller or in the minds and bodies of masses of people forced to take flight, in the ordinary conversation across a telephone line or through the global distribution of a Bollywood blockbuster, across land, sea and air, in different forms and through different means, across a multiplicity of bodies, culture finds its way into different places over different times. Culture in all its flexibility allows us to think not just of the stuff that is carried but also all that goes on in the carrying.

This book is a book about *cultural matters*. It is a book about cultural matters in two senses: first, in the sense that it is concerned with questions about the materiality of culture, about its material practices, about the

technologies that support it and shape it, about the forms and affects that any culture might have; and, secondly, it looks at why culture might be important in the shaping of our and other people's lives and at how culture has been valued in the academic study of culture, in particular in the discipline of cultural studies. But what, then, is culture? What is the matter of culture? And what kind of matter is the matter of culture? The English cultural critic, Raymond Williams, states boldly in his *Culture and Society* (1958) that 'the idea of culture, and the word itself in its general modern uses, came into English thinking in the period which we commonly describe as that of the Industrial Revolution'. A particular idea of culture emerges in relation to a series of related ideas about industry, democracy, class, and art. But to what does this idea refer? Williams argues that in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the word 'culture' changes its meaning:

> Before this period, it had meant, primarily, the 'tending of natural growth', and then, by analogy, a process of human training. But this latter use, which had usually been a culture *of* something, was changed, in the nineteenth century, to *culture* as such, a thing in itself. It came to mean, first, 'a general state or habit of mind', having close relations with the idea of human perfection. Second, it came to mean 'the general state of intellectual development, in a society as a whole'. Third, it came to mean 'the general body of the arts'. Fourth, later in the century, it came to mean 'a whole way of life, material, intellectual and spiritual'. (1958: xvi)

A song by João Bosco or the abolitionist philosophy of Frederick Douglass might be understood through the first three types of culture to which Williams refers. These forms of culture refer to the arts and high cultural disciplines that are seen to cultivate the mind and the spirit, to lift oneself and society more generally above the quagmire of dereliction and depravity. Equally though, the peoples of Nantucket or Ponte Nova might be understood in the sense of culture as a 'whole way of life'. Thus we would understand a whaling community not simply according to the work that these people carried out, but according to how they lived more generally, including their forms of artistic expression as well as the ceremonies of marriage and kinship relations.

For Williams 'culture' in the nineteenth century takes up a privileged position of being able to document and bear witness to the changes in those other fields of industry, democracy, class and art. In that sense, culture takes on the capacity of being that which allows being to reflect and to be conscious of itself. Whether a television news programme or an advert on the subway or the statue of a political figure, culture is able to witness events and circumstances, changes and developments, lives and deaths in domains outside of itself. It makes possible a kind of reflection on the world. But in Williams' account, culture comes into being only inasmuch as it grows and

changes from being a *being in process* to *being as a state*, as if the process of being, that we might ordinarily associate with the notion of growth, is not sufficiently indicative of solidity and materiality. It is as if culture as a process is not seen to sufficiently matter. Of concern, then, is that in fore-grounding a culture of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century as the matter of culture, we lose sight of culture in its more natural, organic, but also more technical and technological sense: namely, we lose sight of culture as growth and training. Culture could refer to the environment in which bees, oysters, fish, silk or bacteria might emerge and grow, but also to the growing itself, to the tending of the organisms, plants and animals, to their training and to their development. Culture refers to the close correlation between growth and government, in the sense that a parent governs the upbringing of their child. Such an idea of culture brings its meaning close to that of cultivation, to the cultivation of plants and animals and, by analogy, to the cultivation of manners and dress in humans. Just as the care and train-ing of a field of wheat helps to produce a good yield, so it was thought, from the Romans onward, that humans could be equally cultivated.

Of course, by the end of *Culture and Society*, Williams has come full circle and suggests in response to the wound that is made upon society by indus-trial modernity that any sense of solidarity, of community and common culture must pay attention to its husbandry:

> Against this the idea of culture is necessary, as an idea of the tending of *natural* growth. To know, even in part, any group of living process, is to see and wonder at their extraordinary variety and complex-ity. To know, even in part, the life of man, is to see and wonder at its extraordinary multiplicity, its great fertility of value ... The tending is a common process, based on common decision, which then, within itself, comprehends the actual variations of life and growth. The natural growth and the tend-ing are parts of a mutual process, guaranteed by the fundamental principle of equality of being. (1958: 337–8)

But instead of proposing culture as growth and government as a solution to the problem of division and inequality in modern society, we will, in this book, take it as our starting point. In that sense, when the literary critic, Terry Eagleton, reminds us that to talk of 'cultural materialism' is to present a tautology, we should not read either term as providing limits on the other (Eagleton, 2000). This book intends to avoid the Scylla of presuming that cul-ture is reducible to, or determined by, matter and the Charybdis of taking matter as that fixed stuff of the world that can only be divided and shaped by an active culture.

That said, we should not then presume that the matter of culture – its being or its ontology, to put it more philosophically – is reducible to economic matter, to human bodily matter, or to lived experiential matter. If

anything, the history of culture from the late eighteenth century onward tells us that, importantly, matters of culture are also spiritual. Most notably the English critic, poet, and schools administrator, Matthew Arnold says in his influential volume *Culture and Anarchy* (1960 [1869]) '*The kingdom of God is within you*; and culture, like manner, places human perfection in an *internal* condition, in the growth and predominance of our humanity proper, as distinguished from our animality' (1960: 47). For Arnold, culture is what is best, the ability to know what is best, the mental and spiritual application of what is best, and the pursuit of what is best. Such an understanding of culture as spiritual matter, read through the doctrine of Christian Anglican theology, reads the traits of industrial capitalism, whether in terms of the bourgeois striving for wealth or the harsh realities of poverty, as matter to be purged:

> Now, the use of culture is that it helps us, by means of its spiritual standard of perfection, to regard wealth as but machinery, and not only to say as a matter of words that we regard wealth as but machinery, but really to perceive and feel it is so. If it were not for this purging effect wrought upon our minds by culture, the whole world, the future as well as the present, would inevitably belong to the Philistines. (1960: 51–2)

For Arnold the spiritual matters of culture are posed against industry, machinery, and materialism:

> The idea of perfection as an *inward* condition of the mind and spirit is at variance with the mechanical and material civilisation ... Faith in machinery is ... our besetting danger ... as if it had a value in and for itself. What freedom but machinery? what is population but machinery? what is coal but machinery? what are railroads but machinery? what is wealth but machinery? what are, even, religious organisations but machinery? (1960: 49–50)

A theological division between soul and matter, between indivisible spirit and divisible matter, is presented, such that when life is reduced to mechanics it is only ever seen as instrumental. But for Arnold, culture as the inward perfection of the soul is matched by its more '*general* expansion of the human family', in terms of the capacity of culture to be constitutive of a humanity that is more than the individual, and by its '*harmonious* expansion of human nature', in terms of its ability 'for seeing more than one side of a thing' (1960: 49).

For some, such as the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, this spiritual aspect of culture is closely tied to a sensibility for the nation and for the tradition and progress of civilisation. Thus against the backdrop of a still-recent memory of the French Revolution of 1789, he says:

> [T]he objects and final intention of the whole order being these – preserve the stores, and to guard the treasures, of past civilisation, and thus to bind the present to the past; to perfect and add to the same, and thus to connect the present with the future; but especially to diffuse through the whole

community, and to every native entitled to its laws and rights, that quantity and quality of knowledge which was indispensable both for understanding of those rights, and for the performance of the duties correspondent. (1972: 34)

Only if wisely guided and cultivated can a nation and civilisation grow. For Coleridge, writing before Arnold, an ecclesiastical language is used to describe the cultivation of a nation, but it is one that was intended to be stripped of its religion, such that any governing class cultivating the spirit of the nation was not of a religious, but a cultural, nature.

It is in the context of the French revolution that a range of philosophers and poets, writing before Arnold, help to give birth to a sense of culture as embodying the spirit of the people, namely a notion that the people are the primary site of cultural expression, a people of spirit and nation. This seemingly more modern definition can be seen clearly, nearly 100 years later, in its more solidified form in Edward Burnett Tylor's 1871 text *Primitive Culture*: 'Culture or Civilisation, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society' (Tylor, 1874: 1, quoted in Bennett, 1998: 93; Kuper, 2000: 56). The anthropologist, Adam Kuper, refers to Tylor's work as nothing less than 'an intellectual revolution' (2000: 56), but although there is much agreement that Tylor's definition of culture leaves little that is not included under its wing, there is some dispute as to the role that Tylor plays in the long genealogy of modern culture. For example, the historian of anthropology, George Stocking had argued that Tylor's definition, in fact rested on Arnold's understanding of culture and civilisation: namely, far from putting into play a relativist understanding of different cultures (in the plural), Tylor had reduced culture to a single evolutionary and hierarchical model (i.e. to Culture in the singular) (Stocking, 1968). Thus we can clearly see this when Tylor states, with regard to the question of hierarchically organising different cultures across the globe, that: '[t]he educated world of Europe and America practically settles a standard by simply placing its own nations at one end of the social series and savage tribes at the other, arranging the rest of mankind between these limits according as they correspond more closely to savage or to cultured life' (Tylor, 1874: 26).

Tylor's relation, not just to Arnold, but to the Romantic tradition, is significant in terms of how we understand the notion that culture is a whole way of life. Williams, in 1958, clearly locates the emergence of this idea in the tradition of Coleridge and Carlyle:

The sense of 'culture' as a 'whole way of life' has been most marked in twentieth-century anthropology and sociology ... The sense depends, in fact, on the literary tradition. The development of social anthropology has tended to inherit and substantiate the ways of looking at society and a common

> life which had earlier been wrought out from general experience of industrialism. The emphasis on a 'whole way of life' is continuous from Coleridge and Carlyle, but what was a personal assertion of value has become a general intellectual method. (1958: 232–3)

By and large though, most modern commentators, and Williams himself in his later works, refer to Tylor as the originator of culture in its anthropological sense. Thus, for example, even the poet and critic T.S. Eliot, in his *Notes Toward the Definition of Culture*, states that: 'the culture of the individual cannot be isolated from that of the group, and … the culture of the group cannot be abstracted from that of the whole society; … our notion of "perfection" must take all three sense of "culture" into account at once' (1948: 24). Moreover, he states that:

> I mean first of all what the anthropologists mean: the way of life of a particular people living together in one place. That culture is made visible in their arts, in their social system, in their habits and customs; in their religion. But these things added together do not constitute the culture … a culture is more than the assemblage of its arts, customs, and religious beliefs. These things all act upon each other, and fully to understand one you have to understand all. (1948: 120)

As the cultural theorist Tony Bennett argues, the definition of culture proposed by Tylor is 'inescapably normative' (1998: 88). But a notion of the 'anthropological concept of culture' is normative, not only because of the way that Tylor provides a model of uneven comparison between different cultures, but also because of the way that a certain version of late nineteenth century anthropology is used to represent the whole of a discipline from then to now. In part, it is due to the uneasy history of the relation between anthropology, colonialism and a sense of culture as residing in the locale of a particular place (the 'tribe', the 'society', the 'nation', the 'people') that contemporary anthropology has become so reflexive and critical about itself as a discipline and about its understanding of culture (cf. Appadurai, 1996; Geertz, 1973; Hannerz, 1992; Rosaldo, 1993; Strathern, 1991, 1995).

Nevertheless, despite the sophistication of many contemporary anthropologists and cultural theorists as to the place and nature of culture, there is a residual normativity that runs throughout some debates about culture in the field of cultural studies and elsewhere. At too many times, the positive ascription of 'the anthropological concept' or the application of an 'ethnographic study' of culture brings with it the baggage of whole series of connotations about place, society and nation. Thus, if in this book I refer to 'the anthropological definition' it is not to reduce anthropology further to a normative understanding, but to foreground the problem of the often unwitting deployment of this late nineteenth century discourse. This is an issue for me because to a large extent this book concerns the attempt to deconstruct that

understanding, to make connections from language and belief to physical materiality, but also to lift culture from the space of an enclosure and stretch it, warp it and twist it. The roots that ground oneself in culture and the routes that traverse that cultural identity mean that we can think about culture as more than simply bound within a single place. I, for example, live in London. If I think about the culture of London, I am forced to do more than look at what happens or has happened within a single geographical place and to do more than look at the people that occupy that particular territory. In order to understand the culture of those people who live in London, I have to look also to the connections that are made to peoples, communities, places, media and cultures across and outside of that particular geographical locale. Moreover, in doing so, we would be forced to rethink the idea that there was any single culture within London, that there was 'a whole way of life' that could be seen and studied. To study a culture, then, means not to analyse the habits, customs, beliefs, ideas and arts in an enclosed and isolated place, but to investigate the connections and disconnections, the circulations and movements, the ups and downs that make a culture a living culture above and beyond its singular location.

The study of culture over the last two centuries has been shaped by the disciplines of anthropology, literary studies and sociology, but also philosophy, art history, linguistics, media studies, psychoanalysis, politics and history to name but a few. Cultural studies – as that discipline that has 'culture' as its primary object of analysis – has been informed by these surrounding disciplines. Cultural studies is a field that is disciplined through its relatively short history by a focus on certain kinds of cultural theory, certain objects of study and certain kinds of method and methodology. To say this is not to claim that cultural studies is not thus interdisciplinary or is not formed by its surrounding and supportive disciplines, but that of necessity any knowledge and any field of knowledge is situated within particular contexts and forms of understanding. It is not that cultural studies is clearly distinguished from these other disciplines that consider the cultural, but that cultural studies is perhaps a favoured home for doing so. In many ways, cultural studies has taken a lead and has become a favoured site for thinking across these disciplinary spaces about historical and contemporary culture. Moreover, cultural studies is a frame within which one can consider the translations and cross-overs across objects of study, such as the relation between a novel and a television programme, or a film and genetic biology, or an airport and professional fashions, or a Latin text on military campaigns and nineteenth century painting.

By and large, the cross-overs that have contributed to the formation of cultural studies have been within the arts, humanities and human sciences. But more recent innovation in the discipline has led, in the context of the

cultural, to translation between the humanities, social sciences and the physical and medical sciences. For example, recent research might consider the relations between a medical text, masculine practices of medicine and the emergence of medical diagnostics, or it might consider our understanding of the novelistic form and the impact of early twentieth century physics. Cultural studies has become a space for thinking about the economics of globalisation and the cultural fact of empire, for grappling with the relation between genetic technoscience and film culture, for mapping the physical connections between different identities in geographical space, and for imagining how objects might have something to say about the nature of culture. In this sense, cultural studies is one of the places in which it is possible to analyse the relations across the human and non-human, the technological and the organic, and the natural and artificial. Such work clearly questions any conventional understanding of the divisions between culture and nature, culture and technology, or culture and materiality.

In this book I try to give a sense of some of the main theoretical models for understanding recent developments in the field concerning culture and materiality, but I do so in the context of what many would see as the founding and longstanding debates and problems of cultural studies. In the opening three chapters I consider three areas of debate that have dominated the field, concerning the production of cultural meanings, the shaping of cultural meanings and identities within structures and institutions of power, and the valorisation of popular culture as a central stage in the organisation of modern societies. In chapter two, on semiotics, I look at the articulation of cultural signs: how cultures take on meaning and are thought to be structured like languages, how cultural expression is always in the context of social interaction and always in relation to an audience and how cultural signs are like machines that do things and that make connections not just to other cultural signs, or in the context of a single cultural system, but to other materialities in sometimes quite complex forms. Then in chapter three the question of power in the context of culture is considered: how culture is structured and formed in the context of relations of power and how culture assists in the exercise of power and control over others. Is culture a means of deceiving people, an ideology that helps to keep people in their place? Or is the relation between culture and power more ambivalent, and more open, oriented as much to the possibility of democracy and freedom as it is to control and domination? In chapter four, I look at the notion of popular culture in the history of cultural studies. I look at why it is important to study popular culture (in the sense that ordinary cultural forms and practices are as important to investigate as elite or high cultural forms and practices), but I also ask what we might mean by that category and whether it has any relevance for

contemporary understandings of culture and cultural formations. My discussion in these opening chapters is intended to give the reader a good sense of some of the core debates in the field, but also to suggest the movement that debate might be taking: namely, in terms of a shift toward understanding cultural semiosis as both symbolic and material, understanding power as not only ideological but also more governmental and technical and understanding a sense of common culture as predicated less on a national people, than on a more dispersed multitude.

In the next four chapters, I look at four contemporary and central problem-spaces, or fields of questioning and investigation, in cultural studies: the problem of identity, the problem of body, the problem of economy and the problem of globalisation. The list is certainly not exhaustive, but it is suggestive of what may be seen as significant debates for us to consider now. These chapters build on the earlier chapters; they attempt to give the reader a strong grounding in what are the important aspects of these areas of debate; and they are intended to push you into thinking about these areas innovatively. Chapter five, on identity, then looks at questions of cultural identity in the writings of Homi Bhabha, Judith Butler and Stuart Hall concerning questions of cultural authority, performance, and diasporisation. But the chapter also discusses the problem of the subject in relation to an object world that is lived and organised through complex foldings and interaction. In chapter six, on the body, I consider culture, not in opposition to, but alongside nature and technology. Donna Haraway's understanding of the cyborg or Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's thoughts on desiring-machines or Bruno Latour and Michel Callon's work on actor-networks all help us to rethink more classical conceptions of the body and natural organism. Moreover, it is through the work of Michel Foucault that we begin to understand how not only the body, but life itself has since the eighteenth century increasingly become a central focus of power and knowledge. Suffice it to say, this has major implications for how we think about culture. In the following chapter seven, on the economic, I look at how Marxist approaches to the relation between culture and economy were pursued in cultural studies in the 1970s and 1980s. But I also look to more recent work on how the economic is itself seen as a cultural phenomenon. To suggest that something seemingly so material as the economic can be thought of as cultural has profound consequences for how we understand the economic but also culture itself. And in the last chapter of this section, chapter eight, I look at the problem of globalisation. In the contemporary world it is hard not to see how cultural spaces are connected to other cultural spaces and infused by cultures from other places. Culture is increasingly circulated, stretched and warped. I look at this problem in terms of contemporary debate about changing economic, social, political and

cultural conditions, in the context of the brute historical fact of empire, but I also urge a note of caution with regard to how to account for the scale of such a global problem. In the final chapter of the book, I conclude not only by attempting to bring together the various debates and arguments and schools of thought discussed in the book, but also by raising the question of how we might think about an ethics of cultural study. In doing so, we return to some of the core literature within the field, but read from a different angle. Across all of these chapters the relation between culture and matter and the question of the materiality of culture is a constant provocation: what is the matter of culture? How is culture material?

This book is one for students who are initially coming to the field, as much as it is one for those thinking about some key issues at more advanced stages in their thought. It is a book that is clearly theoretical. It is not a book about method or about how to research culture. It is a book of ideas about the nature of culture. This is an introductory book, but it is not meant to be an easy book to read – as if interesting ideas should be easily digested and consumed. But nor is it a difficult book as if good ideas were only ones that were incomprehensible or made incomprehensible through lack, rather than acquisition, of knowledge. The understanding of culture – no less than the mending of a car, working in a stock exchange, or caring for the plants in a garden – implies the need for a technical (i.e. theoretical) language. Any technical language, of necessity, marks a difference between the one who knows and the one who doesn't, between the professional and the lay person. Such ideas lie at the heart of cultural studies thinking, about popular culture and about democracy. But the point is not to make analysis accessible to the point of meaninglessness. Nor is the point to make this book a popular book, if by that I mean one read or capable of being read by all and anyone. Rather this book is intended as a point of translation between a discipline and field of study and those who are interested in these ideas and those who want to learn more. In many ways it is not intended to drag everyone in off the streets; it could not, nor should it try. It is a book in a sea of other books and writings about culture. It is hoped that anyone reading it will understand that to sail across the waves requires some training of how to handle a boat in the water; how one achieves that training is another matter, but for me this book in front of you is one form of that discipline.

TWO   Semiosis: From Representation to Translation

When a man marches into a room wearing a military uniform and holding a rifle on his shoulder, we have a pretty good idea that this man is either a soldier or he is someone pretending to be a soldier. The man is dressed not only with the cloth, leather, buttons and shiny bits of metal, but with *signs*, entities that tell us something about the man, that signify to us and that allow us to make an interpretation. The combat fatigues, boots and rifle do not only signify the man, they also signify the community to which, not the man, but the signs belong. This said, within a single sign community or across different sign communities there may be not agreement as to the meaning of a sign, but disagreement and struggle. Does the uniform signify liberation or occupation, 'our side' or 'their side', peace or war? Moreover, a gun in the hands of a soldier is surely a sign, but its bullets do more than signify.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the US pragmatist philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce referred to the process of how signs are produced, interpreted and connected to things and to each other as *semiosis*. Peirce argues that a sign is something that stands for something to somebody in some respect or capacity (cf. Peirce, 1998: 13). For Peirce a sign is something that is interpreted (i.e. it has an interpretant that is attached to the sign) and is related to an object (i.e. that which the interpretant is about):

> [A] sign is anything, of whatsoever mode of being, which mediates between an object and interpretant; since it is both determined by the object *relatively to the interpretant*, and determines the interpretant *in reference to the object*, in such wise as to cause the interpretant to be determined by the object through the mediation of this 'sign'. The object and the interpretant are thus the two correlates of the sign; the one being antecedent, the other consequent of the sign. (1998: 410)

Although in many ways an oversimplification of Peirce's philosophy of signs, it can be argued that in some respects he is interested in the degree of motivation between an object, a sign and its interpretant (cf. Eco, 1976). In his science of signs, or semiotics, he makes a distinction between different

kinds of semiotic relations according to, what we might understand as, the degree of motivation (cf. 1992: 5–7, 226–8; 1998: 410). First, at one end, he refers to the *symbol* that has no motivated relation to its object and interpretant over and above its conventional usage. In that sense, the symbolic designates a relation between object, sign and interpretant that is arbitrary. Secondly, Peirce talks of signs that are linked to the object through a sense of likeness. He refers to these signs as *icons*. Thus a photograph is iconic in the sense that the photograph is an exact resemblance of that which is represented; the icon is isomorphic of that which is represented. Finally, Peirce refers to signs that have a high degree of motivation as indices. An *index* is linked to its object through relations of contiguity: namely through closeness, connectedness or causality. The classic example, is that smoke is an index of fire (cf. Peirce, 1998: 4–10). The semiotic nature of the index has interested many from the ancient Stoics to those concerned with the development of medical semiotics (diagnostics) in the nineteenth century onward (cf. Eco, 1984). For example, medical science is able to methodically investigate the translation of signs and objects from symptoms such as sweating, high temperature, aching limbs, sore throat and coughing to the diagnosis of influenza. Or it is able to identify swelling and softness of surface tissue and diagnose internal bleeding. Sometimes the diagnosis names the collection of symptoms; sometimes it names the cause.

But much work on the semiotics of culture has been influenced, not only by Peirce, but by the early twentieth century Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure of whom we will talk much more shortly. The semiotics of culture has focused, by and large, on the question of representation and on the sign as symbolic and, by and large, it has been highly critical of approaches that recognise the relative degree of motivation between signs and objects. Moreover, to a large extent in cultural studies, the world of signs as symbolic has been contrasted to a world of materiality; the former has been seen to be as constructive of and representative of that materiality. Thus, Stuart Hall states:

> According to this approach, we must not confuse the *material* world, where things and people exist, and the *symbolic* practices and processes through which representation, meaning and language operate. Constructivists do not deny the existence of the material world. However, it is not the material world which conveys meaning: it is the language system or whatever system we are using to represent our concepts. (1997a: 25)

Furthermore, it is within the symbolic that agency (namely, the capacity to do things) is made visible. Hall continues:

> It is social actors who use the conceptual systems of their culture and the linguistic and other representational systems to construct meaning, to make the world meaningful and to communicate about that world meaningfully to others. (1997a: 25)

The advantage of adopting such an approach that looks exclusively at symbolic relations between signs is that we can begin to understand the systematic nature of signification. Different dress codes, for example, are understood with reference to the system of dress codes as a whole. A person dressed as a soldier is differentiated from one dressed as a sailor and one dressed as a airwoman. The different colours of the uniforms (for example, green, white, blue) signify the differences between the different armed forces. It is not that the colour white necessarily signifies a sailor in the navy, but rather that the colour only signifies with reference to what it is not (i.e. to the system as a whole). One of the problems with such an approach though is that it is concerned with symbolic relations to the detriment of other types of semiotic relations. Thus, consider the following example: a young naval recruit is given a pair of heavy black boots that signify 'hard-wearing' and 'durable in all conditions'. But if the boots are slightly too big and are beginning to give the recruit blisters, they will nevertheless signify something very different to that recruit. The sign is not simply symbolic, but also indexical. The material discomfort caused by wearing the boot has a relation to the meaning that the 'boot' has for the recruit. Moreover, if the young recruit finds herself with other young recruits in a dark and dank room with a leaky roof and the recruit removes her boot to catch the raindrops dripping from the roof, then the boot will perhaps signify something different again to those other young sailors in this rain-sodden room. The other recruits might, for example, view the sailor as noble and kindly in offering her boot to catch the rain or they might, alternatively, think her foolish and rather stupid, as it will be her wearing a wet boot come morning. In this latter sense, then, the sign is used (over and above any symbolic or indexical meaning it might have) as a means of social interaction with others.

In the following pages I will look at the most important resources for understanding cultural semiosis. I will initially consider Saussure's ideas about the sign, about the linguistic system, and about how such a system is presumed to be commensurate with an enclosed linguistic community (namely, those who speak a common language). I will then look to the work of two Russians, a linguist, Valerian Voloshinov and a literary theorist, Mikhail Bakhtin, in order to understand semiotics in terms of social interaction or dialogue and to see how such approaches might help us to rethink questions about the ordering of society and language. Finally, I look to the works of a range of writers, including Ian Hunter, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, who have found the notion of representation and the distinction between symbolic and material wanting. It is from this work that we get an understanding of semiosis as

concerned with the possibility of translation across material differences and a more complex sense of the relations across social, semiotic and material spaces.

Language, Social Solidarity and Difference

At the beginning of the twentieth century Saussure was trying to understand language as a systemic whole, not reducible to the particular speech acts that give any language its texture. His major work, *Course in General Linguistics* (1915), was paradoxically compiled from student notes from a series of lectures he gave from 1906 to 1911. Although linguistics was the focus of his work, Saussure was attempting to formulate a general science of semiology (his term for the study of signs), that is a science not simply of written or oral language, but of gestural, visual and other languages as well. Central to this project was the notion that 'language is a social fact' (1974: 6). But such a simple turn of phrase, borrowed from the late nineteenth century French sociologist Emile Durkheim, masks the complexity of establishing language as a system.

There are clear parallels between the work of Saussure and others, such as Durkheim, in establishing a form of social science in the context of a series of questions about solidarity and structure. Briefly, Durkheim distinguishes between the different forms of solidarity that underpin pre-modern and modern societies. He privileges a notion of society that is comprised of social facts and collective representations. For Durkheim, the collective consciousness of a society – the shared ideas, values and norms of a community – refers to the collective condition of human social experience and not simply to the sum of individual elements (1982). The analysis of Durkheim's is but one in a longer lineage of thought from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries concerning the nature of social solidarity. At that time, after the French and North American revolutions, the growth of the sovereignty and rights of the individual are conjoined with the development of the idea of 'society' as a domain of association and community, such that the latter could be posed as a domain independent of direct government by the state: namely, as a domain whose rules were seen to be immanent to itself (cf. Donzelot, 1991; Wagner, 2001a, b). In a very literal sense, these thinkers were concerned with questions as to how a society could hold together in the absence of direct monarchical and ecclesiastical rule. For these thinkers, human beings were seen to have a sociality or solidarity that is pre-individual, one that is immanent to the very structure of society. The problem for us today is that this way of making social order intelligible seems to make

the structure of society co-extensive with the territorial boundaries of the nation-state.

It is Saussure, in the early twentieth century, who understands this pre-individual solidarity in terms of the notion of a linguistic community, such that what holds the collective together are not people, but the linguistic system. But let us start at the beginning with the sign. For Saussure, verbal language is made up of a series of sounds that are perceived by the ear. A series of acoustical impressions are produced by the vocal organs that are understood as meaningful sounds. These meaningful sounds are known as *phonemes* and are to be distinguished from grunts or other noises that we would not assume to be part of a linguistic system. For example, the phonemes 'c', 'a' and 't' can be placed together to form a larger meaningful unit referred to as a sound-image or *signifier*. Phonemes are not really meaningful on their own, but when combined with other phonemes they can produce units that are meaningful. 'C', as a phoneme, on its own does not have any meaning, but it does in combination. For Saussure, 'auditory impressions exist unconsciously' (1974: 38). Before a sound is uttered, both speaker and hearer have reference to a system of phonemes that when assembled in particular ways are able to produce meaning. But the collection of phonemes, put together to produce a sound-image, are not simply physiological. They are put together in order to produce meaning and hence, for Saussure, are also psychological. The sound-images are articulated with units of meaning or *signifieds*. Thus 'cat' refers to a fluffy animal with four paws, whiskers, who purrs, eats fish and gets chased by dogs. Signifiers are attached to signifieds according to a *code* and together they comprise a *sign* (Barthes, 1968).

Later semiologists, such as Barthes, have looked at how the units of meaning that are coded (or articulated) with signifiers are of two types. The literal meaning attached to a signifier is known as the *denotation*. Thus the denotation of 'cat' includes the definition we might read in a dictionary, such as 'a small domesticated quadruped' (Concise Oxford English Dictionary, 1964: 186). The second type of signified refers to the wider associative or symbolic meaning that might be attached to a signifier; this is known as the *connotation* (Barthes, 1968, 1973). Thus 'cat', in patriarchal contexts, can also be associated with femininity. Cats are seen as feminine creatures, sleek, sexy, wily and independent. Barthes talks about connotative meaning as ideological (1973).

Both signifiers and signifieds have meaning only inasmuch as they are constructed within systems of difference. In this sense, Saussure and his followers argue that signifiers and signifieds are not defined positively, but only negatively in terms of what they are not. Moreover, the relation between signifiers is not motivated by the object or referent itself. The signifier 'cat' does not have a natural relation to the fluffy animal. Rather the relation between

signifier and signified is arbitrary, although many commentators argue that the relation is actually conventional (cf. Eco, 1976). From this we can gather that signification is purely formal; it is not based on the substantive quality of the world.

For Saussure, individual speech acts, or *parole*, are only possible because of the structure, or system, of language, or *langue*. Thus, the speech act, 'This is my cat', spoken by Mrs Pommefritter at 4.23 in the afternoon on 4 May 1969 in a police station in London, makes sense not because Mrs Pommefritter has a private language known only to herself, but because the signifiers and their grammatical, or syntactical, composition refer to a public system of language. Individual speech acts only make sense in relation to a general system of codification or language. Although the relation between the signifier 'cat' and the signified of 'a fluffy quadruped' is itself arbitrary inasmuch as any signifier could have been used, the signifier that is actually used needs to be one that is used by a whole community of speakers and not Mrs Pommefritter alone. Whereas speech acts are made by individuals in particular circumstances, language as a system is collective. Saussure argues that for language to be social the sign must be arbitrary in nature:

> The arbitrary nature of the sign explains ... why the social fact alone can create a linguistic system. The community is necessary if values that owe their existence solely to usage and general acceptance are to be set up; by himself the individual is incapable of fixing a single value. (1974: 113)

Language is constituted as a 'sort of contract signed by the members of a community' (1974: 14) and although the mass of individual speech acts are heterogeneous (i.e. many and different), the linguistic system itself is homogenous (i.e. one and the same) and can be understood and analysed separately from those speech acts. Language has a life of its own. It is a system, a social institution and a product of its own history. Saussure refers to language as an 'organism' (1974: 20). Thus, although linguistic systems are related to the ethnography and culture of a nation, to political and social history, to social institutions (such as the church, the school and so on) and to changing geographies (i.e. in terms of migrating populations and so on), language is itself, according to Saussure, a separate and distinct entity. For Saussure, then, language is social inasmuch as '[i]ts social nature is one of its inner characteristics' (1974: 77); it is coextensive with its community of speakers, although not reducible to any one speech act by any one of those speakers.

This said, Saussure's understanding of language is somewhat paradoxical. The articulation of signifier and signified meet in the mind of the speaker or listener: language 'is a system of signs in which the only essential thing is the union of meanings and sound-images, and in which both parts of the sign are

psychological' (1974: 15). Linguistic phenomena 'are realities that have their seat in the brain' (1974: 15). But no one human mind contains within it the structure of language itself. The system of language is only found in the collective mind. Saussure states:

> If we could embrace the sum of word-images stored in the minds of all individuals, we could identify the social bond that constitutes language. It is a storehouse filled by the members of a given community through their active use of speaking, a grammatical system that has a potential existence in each brain, or, more specifically, in the brains of a group of individuals. For language is not complete in any speaker; it exists perfectly only within a collectivity. (1974: 14)

Thus although signification, the combination of signifier and signified, is made possible in the mind, this psychological fact is itself a consequence of the system of language, not the individual. In this sense, language is, to borrow from Durkheim, the site of a 'collective consciousness'. Individual speech acts are accidental, not necessary aspects of language.

For Saussure, language is a space of social solidarity. But Saussure adds a different dimension. The system of language is commensurate with the community of speakers of that language and the linguistic actions of individuals are secondary to the primacy of the linguistic organism. Moreover, linguistic solidarity is produced through the mechanisms of language. Saussure talks of *associative* and *syntagmatic solidarities*: '[t]he set of phonic and conceptual differences that constitutes language results from two types of comparisons; the relations are sometimes associative, sometimes syntagmatic' (1974: 127). Associative solidarities refer to those groupings according to common meaning. Thus 'cat', 'dog', 'guinea pig' are associated according to the common paradigm of domestic pets. Associative relations are also known (following the work of the linguist Roman Jakobson) as paradigmatic relations. These relations are, according to Saussure dependent on the memory function of the brain: namely, the brain is able to store a series of common terms, any one of which may be pulled out and placed in a particular linguistic utterance such as 'The cat is sitting on the mat' or 'The dog is sitting on the mat'. These relations are defined as *in absentia* because as one term is used so all the other terms in the storehouse are not used. In contrast, syntagmatic solidarities are defined as *in praesentia* and refer to groupings of signifiers that are present at the same time. Syntagmatic relations refer to the combination of terms standing next to each other. These are linear relations as in the grammatical combination of words in a well-formed sentence, 'The dog eats biscuits'. 'Dog' and 'eats' have no relation of common meaning. Their only relation is due to their being placed next to each other in the forming of a grammatical sentence.