



REIN RAUD

Meaning in Action

Outline of an Integral Theory of Culture

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polity

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First published in 2016 by Polity Press

Polity Press
65 Bridge Street
Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Polity Press
350 Main Street
Malden, MA 02148, USA

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ISBN-13: 978-1-5095-1124-2

ISBN-13: 978-1-5095-1125-9 (pb)

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Raud, Rein, author.

Title: Meaning in action : outline of an integral theory of culture / Rein Raud.

Description: Cambridge, UK ; Malden, MA : Polity Press, [2016] | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016000161 | ISBN 9781509511242 (hardback : alk. paper) | ISBN 9781509511259 (pbk. : alk. paper)

Subjects: LCSH: Culture--Semiotic models. | Language and culture. | Culture--Philosophy.

Classification: LCC GN357 .R38 2016 | DDC 306.01--dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2016000161>

Typeset in 10.5 on 12 pt Sabon by

Servis Filmsetting Ltd, Stockport, Cheshire

Printed and bound in the UK by CPI Group Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

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Civilization consists in giving an inappropriate name to something and then dreaming what results from that. And in fact the false name and the true dream do create a new reality. The object really does become other, because we have made it so. We manufacture realities. We use the raw material we always used but the form lent it by art effectively prevents it from remaining the same.

Fernando Pessoa, *The Book of Disquiet* (2002:53)

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The first ideas for this book were formulated during the summer of 1989, when I had just become a graduate student. So it has been quite a long journey, during which many initially promising ideas have turned out to be dead ends and hundreds of pages have not made it to the final version. Over all these years, I have been lucky to have the support of too many people to list them all here, but some deserve special mention: Tarmo Jüristo, Mihhail Lotman, Ülar Ploom and Marek Tamm for their thorough comments on previous versions of the book; Zygmunt Bauman for his support and wisdom; as well as Hannes Palang for constant encouragement. I would also like to thank my friends and colleagues in Cambridge, particularly Richard Bowring, Peter Kornicki and Mark Morris, for their hospitality and help. Some of the research for this book was financed by grants ETF7218, SF0130129s08, IUT3-2 and TK18U01 from various Estonian funding authorities. Last, but not least, my heartfelt gratitude goes to Leigh Mueller, whose sensitive editing has greatly contributed to the readability of my text, as well as to John Thompson, without whom the book would not have become possible.

This book is dedicated to my family – Rosita, Juhan and Laura Liina. Thank you for having faith in me.

INTRODUCTION

This book is primarily motivated by the current situation in the study of culture(s), which has become rather narrow in its interests. Even though books with titles promising new theoretical advances in the field continue to appear, in fact these almost invariably turn out to be case studies with little ambition for generalization, or discussions of other authors who have had such ambition in the past. No real breakthroughs have been made for decades. It has almost become improper to theorize about culture in broader terms. Under the conditions of increased specialization, the bigger picture is getting hazier and hazier. At the same time, the concept of culture, defined sloppily or not at all, is occupying an increasingly central place in social and political debate. Globalization, culture shocks, multiculturalism and 'civilization conflicts' are being discussed by the general public almost daily – but with the help of a conceptual apparatus from about fifty years ago, which has been simplified to the extreme. In the process, the word 'culture' itself has come to refer to 'the exact opposite of what it was originally intended to mean' (Trouillot 2003:104), lending itself to bolstering conservative, reductionist and determinist agendas.

This is not to say there has been no positive development at all. The long overdue dialogue with natural sciences, genetics and neuroscience in particular – something called for already in the classic discussion of Kroeber and Kluckhohn on the definitions of culture (1952) – has gradually gained momentum. But all of it is happening entirely on the partner's terms. Cultural theorists do not seem to have anything to contribute and helplessly watch how their subject is being explained away in hard science terms (Blackmore 1999; Laland 2011; Lynch 1996), both for an academic audience and in more popular form.

Undoubtedly, quite a lot about human behaviour can be described in biological terms and should be put into a larger context, but this does not mean that cultural phenomena can be fully clarified in these terms only. In a differing context, the focus of the field is shifting away from cultural phenomena in the direction of the social and the economical. For example, the influential ‘strong program’ of Jeffrey Alexander and Philip Smith (2001), its recognition of the autonomous nature of cultural processes notwithstanding, is primarily aimed at the explanation of cultural phenomena as a part of the social whole. The ‘cultural science’ of John Hartley (2008) is programmatically opened up towards economics, while distancing itself from the study of particular phenomena for their semantic content. Most certainly the social and economic background is extremely important for understanding particular phenomena as well as the processes that generate and influence them, but taking such factors into account should not lead us back into economic or any other kind of determinism.

Another characteristic of current research on cultural matters is the trend to restrict its subject matter to fairly recent phenomena. Under the influence of the Birmingham school, most of what is now called ‘cultural studies’, or sometimes even ‘culture and media studies’, is engaged with practices of current popular culture, lifestyles and consumer products. This is not to say that our immediate cultural surroundings should not be analysed and criticized – just to point out that ‘culture’ still might refer to more than certain practices of the post-industrial West.

In yet another department, anthropologists operate with a wholly different concept of culture, derived from, but not restricted to, the modes of being human of the cultural Other. Here, too, long conceptual wars have been fought over the idea of culture as such (see, e.g., Fox and King 2002). Recent anthropological research has done a fine job in extrapolating its approaches to the human condition as such, and not just societies operating on different premises from our own. And yet, for most anthropologists ‘culture’ means primarily lived practice, actions rather than ideas or texts, which only come to the fore as elements shaping collective experience. As a result, the views on culture current in anthropological writing, tuned as they are to the solving of particular research questions, also remain limited in the range of phenomena they address.

Unquestionably, all these approaches are both legitimate and productive. However, culture cannot and should not be reduced to biological and socio-economic mechanisms only. All their insights notwithstanding, biocentric and sociocentric theories are unable

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to explain the enormous variability of human cultural experience. Nor should 'culture' be reduced to popular media or ethnographic descriptions. In order to understand culture, we need a broader view that would integrate all these approaches and complement them with the specific methods of textual theory, cultural history and other disciplines that have traditionally engaged in the study of our intellectual heritage and its present forms.

Indeed, the need for such a theory is being articulated by many. An increasing (even if subdued) chorus of voices critical of the current trends suggests that the separation of cultural analysis from the actual study of texts and the exclusive concentration on the present may already have taken the pendulum of cultural theory to the end of its current trajectory. To cite but a few examples from scholars working in various fields: Sheldon Pollock points out a widespread 'shallow presentism of scholarship and even antipathy to the past as such' (2009:935), while Robert Eaglestone doubts even the capacity of the discipline to handle the present: 'we fail to respond to the contemporary nature of our field, the "now"-ness of it' because 'we do not even have a clear idea of what the problems are. It is not that there is a consensus: there is not even a dissensus. We do not even know what the "basic concepts" are that need to undergo a radical revision' (2013:1093). Rita Felski, in turn, points out a hidden elitist agenda behind the rhetoric of subversion, 'a covert bid for moral superiority and cutting edge radicalism in the highly charged fray of academic politics. The vanguardism of cultural studies takes a distinctive form; it lies not in vaunting the authority of intellectuals vis-à-vis the people but in trumping its own superiority as a field vis-à-vis the conventional disciplines' (2003:502). Perhaps we should say more: in spite of its original opposition to the oppressive hierarchies of its day, 'cultural studies' have by now become the new orthodoxy, a conservative and stale field within which nothing really new has appeared for decades. Even one of the founding fathers of the discipline, Stuart Hall, has been reported as saying, towards the end of his life, that he 'really cannot read another cultural-studies analysis of Madonna or The Sopranos' (Bérubé 2009). This, of course, is not to deny the important contribution that this discipline has historically made to the study of cultures by broadening the extent of the field to include the 'uncanonical', or the phenomena not endorsed by the elites, as well as by alerting researchers to always pay attention to the power relations and the specifics of production behind the cultural process. And yet, after the theoretical 'explosion' of the 1970s and 1980s, we have been slowly drifting onto a rather uninspiring trail, where

well-tested ideas are recycled and applied to whatever cases the author happens to be studying. ‘Cultural studies’, in their present form, have exhausted their potential, and the study of cultures – which is not the same thing – needs to be reinvigorated. This is not a conservative call back to the progressivist, hierarchical and totalizing views of culture from the nineteenth century, but an invitation to move on, towards an integral and holistic, but not determinist or reductive view of the human effort to make sense of our living environment.

For what it is worth, this book presents an attempt to construct such an integral theory that would bring textual analysis back into the discussion of cultural phenomena while at the same time not isolating them from their broader context of social practice or biological ground. Its second objective is to construct a rigorous but nonetheless flexible conceptual apparatus that can be used to address all cultural phenomena, present or past, that are meaningful for us, as well as being able to open up the results of the text-oriented and the practice-oriented investigations of cultural phenomena to each other. I believe the latter is essential – for a holistic understanding of culture, it is insufficient to view its phenomena only from one, however well-formed, single perspective.

Thus, the book sets itself the ambitious goal of bringing together several separate and influential traditions of speaking about its topic: the cultural semiotics of Umberto Eco (1976, 1979, 1984, 2000) and Yuri Lotman (1970, 1992, 1993, 2010a, 2010b), the cultural sociologies of Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 1988, 1991, 1993, 2007) and Zygmunt Bauman (1987, 1992, 1999, 2007a, 2007b), as well as a number of meaning-oriented anthropological approaches (D’Andrade 1995; de Certeau 1993; Geertz 1993; Strauss and Quinn 1997) that recognize the autonomy of individual cultural systems. I also admit a considerable debt to the cultural pragmatics of Jeffrey Alexander and his school (2006, 2011a, 2011b, 2013), the school of cultural psychology (Boyer and Wertsch 2009; Simão and Valsiner 2007; Valsiner and Rosa 2007; Valsiner and van der Veer 2000) and most certainly to Michel Foucault (2002a, 2002b), whose thought first led me to theorize about culture as a discursive system in practice, even if he is not evoked by name too often.

However, even though it stands on the shoulders of giants, just as any academic project necessarily does, this book is not primarily a response to or reflection on previous work, but a systematic and theoretical endeavour, distilled from the multitude of my own micro-level methodological solutions to problems I have encountered during years of research on cultural phenomena, Western and Asian,

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past and present. I am convinced that a theory should be evaluated on the basis not of its structural qualities (for example, elegance or complexity), but of its explanatory power. I believe that the analysis of an object of research is successful if and only if it is able to generate a broader and more adequate view of that object. I also think that, even though the objects of research in the humanities are necessarily vague, their terminology should not be, just as natural scientists observing fog employ no less strict language than those classifying rocks. The notorious difficulties that plague the conceptualization of cultural phenomena should not be considered a valid reason to give up the effort. Obviously, I do not believe that any judgement on the realities of social and cultural processes could be passed from a value-free, ideologically neutral viewpoint. But, following Karl Mannheim (1985:78–80), I hold that a position that is able to consider its own inevitable ideological bias is to be preferred to one that cannot.

This is why I have tried to keep the theory as simple as possible (admittedly not always succeeding), yet without compromises in the content. I have coined as few new concepts and redefined as few current ones as possible. Some of both has still proved to be necessary, even if fine-tuning and adjusting to the context does not count. In a word, I have tried to keep the theoretical construction reasonably compact and clear without simplifying its objects. The theory also does not seek to divorce itself from the hands-on analysis of particular cultural phenomena, contemporary and historical, familiar and structurally different.

AN OUTLINE OF THE THEORY AND THE BOOK

Any theory of culture has to start with the definition of its object. In chapter 1, I argue for an approach to culture that is able to account for all phenomena related to the production, dissemination, transmission and interpretation of meaning. If culture constitutes the sum total of our efforts to make sense of our world, from the most individual and personal level to the most universal, then meaning should indeed be the common denominator for all phenomena we consider cultural. But meaning is not something abstract; it is itself produced in and by individual minds when they confront their reality.

Throughout the book, I stress the binary nature of cultural phenomena. On the one hand, there are more or less stable and shareable fixtures of meaning from images and narratives to laws, dress codes and domesticated spaces such as cities. A cultural subject comes into being in dialogue with such entities – texts – and inevitably participates in their production as well. On the other hand, culture manifests itself in all kinds of activities, from real rituals to ritualistic behaviour, from displaying curiosities to auditions for reality shows, from witch-trials to defences of dissertations. All activities grounded in meaning, or cultural practices, also construct their participants while being constructed by them in the process: you become a ‘player’ by ‘playing’. I will proceed from the description of the signifying act – the elementary cultural event – to the nature of the mechanisms that combine and organize singular moments of signification into larger meaningful wholes, ‘texts’ and ‘textualities’, and from there to the cultural practices that relate the signifying wholes to the behaviour of people towards each other as well as all levels of their environment.

Chapter 2 will outline the theory of meaning used in this book. Just as cultural activity iterates between textuality and practice, the

human subject also conceptualizes the world in two different ways that result in two different kinds of concepts – through direct experience, when the empirical flux is structured into a manageable reality, and with the help of acquired tools: by learning, for instance, that an unknown city is situated in a certain country of which the person has no experience. Concepts learned this way are, in Saussurean terms, more closely related to the signifier while the ones deduced from lived experience are inherent in the signified. It can be said that the moment of becoming meaningful, or the act of signification, takes place when these two concepts converge. This does not happen solely through an internal realization, but rather as a response to a *claim*. When an adult is speaking with a child and points to a furry barking animal, saying ‘This is a dog!’, she makes the claim that the signifier [dog], which the child may already know from a bedtime story, is associated with the animal they are observing. Of course, it is possible to use signs – for example, for abstract concepts – that hark back only to other signs that form their definitions, the only reality to which they refer. But all these derive, in the last resort, from similarly accepted claims, just as physically non-existent fictional characters are imagined through an analogy with real people. It is also possible *not* to accept claims others are making by saying, for example, ‘this is what being a real man is all about’, when the experiential concept does not fit the one acquired through learning. Moments like this highlight the difference between the two kinds of concepts, unnoticed in uncritical situations. And, from within, it is also possible to construct private-language signifiers with which one can refer to personally relevant reality slices. Nonetheless, reality on the whole becomes culturally meaningful to the perceiver through acts of signification that claim the identity of intralinguistic, learned concepts and experiential concepts, and it is these *claims*, not actually existing relations of meaning, that become reified in signs. And this is precisely what constitutes their irreducible arbitrariness. In a claim, the relation between the intralinguistic concept, definable through linguistically expressed characteristics, and the experiential concept, derived from our observation of reality, is necessarily arbitrary.

But stand-alone signs or their random combinations do not constitute cultural phenomena. Various sets of rules that govern cultural expression make it possible for us to express ourselves – to engage in practices and produce texts – and for others to interpret our utterances. These ‘grammars’ are modulated by the mentalities, the structures of knowledge, the worldviews of their historical context, which, deep down, have a similarly cultural origin. Although most

of our cultural environment is handed down to us in a ready-made form, the elements that constitute it have all been produced by the same dynamic processes that are taking place in our minds when they encounter something unknown.

It should also be noted that cultural phenomena do not automatically enter circulation. At this next level, there is a mechanism at work similar to that within the elementary act of signification. Any new cultural expression (text or pattern of practice) that seeks to be acknowledged by the community makes a *bid*, a promise to be meaningful to its recipients in certain ways. Thousands of clothes designers produce new models each year and each of them makes a bid to be the expression of the new trends in fashion. Thousands of new poets make their debut and each of them makes the bid to be the voice of the new generation. Especially in the present times, when the equipment for producing a sample CD, a portfolio of photographs or a video is accessible to a much larger proportion of aspiring creative personalities than ever before, the number of bids greatly outweighs the number of those texts that are accepted by cultural institutions. At the same time, more democratic as well as more cheaply available new channels of communication, such as the internet, have also made alternative dissemination possible. Nevertheless, even after a text has initially entered circulation, it remains only a bid until it is endorsed by a critical mass of its intended recipients – tens of thousands of dedicated fans if the bid is to be a pop idol, or perhaps a dozen academics if it is a bid for the reinterpretation of the seventeenth-century Ethiopian philosopher Zera Yacob. If a bid is accepted, it will gain access to proper channels of circulation, which, in turn, determine the rules for its reception. Each cultural text comes with an implicit operation manual. A romantic comedy shown at an arthouse cinema may be poorly welcomed, even if the majority of the audience likes to see a romantic comedy now and then, but in another setting.

At this point it will be useful to start describing the mechanisms of the cultural system with the help of not one, but two separate models, a text-centred and a practice-centred one, sketched here in the barest outline. It is possible to look at a culture as primarily the sum total of all products of meaning production, or texts in the widest sense of the word – written and oral, verbal and visual, aural, corporal, spatial. But it is also possible to describe the cultural system as a totality of different, sometimes mingling, mostly collective but occasionally private, practices in which its carriers engage, producing and consuming texts in the process, sometimes simply as negligible

by-products. For a holistic view, it is important not to privilege one of these perspectives over the other, though (or actually because) they operate with incompatible sets of concepts.

Chapter 3 will be dedicated to the text-centred model of culture. I will first distinguish between two categories of texts that differ in status and function. First, there are the texts that every carrier of the culture could be expected to know – at least to some extent or by hearsay – and the extent of her knowledge is a measure of her level of education. The Gospel, *Hamlet*, elementary table manners, *Mona Lisa*, the beginning of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, basic traffic rules and the Eiffel Tower are examples of such texts in contemporary Western culture. I will call these nodes of meanings *base-texts*. No cultural system is totally homogeneous, and one way to identify its different layers is by the differences in their sets of base-texts. The heavy metal cultural community counts 'War Pigs' and *Smoke on the Water* among them, while *Giselle* and *The Nutcracker* belong to the base-texts of ballet enthusiasts, but the Eiffel Tower, traffic rules and *Mona Lisa* are shared by both. Obviously, the borders of these communities are not closed and a person with somewhat more catholic tastes can actually appreciate ballet and heavy metal alike. This also demonstrates that the category of base-texts has no fixed boundaries – immediately next to those actually shared by the overwhelming majority of the carriers of a culture are texts that are still only making the bid to be accepted on this level, emerging from a subculture and claiming their spot on the central stage. Similarly, there are texts, such as the catechism or novels by Mikhail Sholokhov, the Nobel classic author of socialist realism, that have previously been base-texts in their respective cultures, but are no longer.

At the opposite end of the status scale are *result-texts*, bids that have just been accepted and entered circulation, as well as those that have done so some time ago but are still being considered recent arrivals by their recipients. Some of them may eventually acquire a more solid position, become the base-texts of a subculture, and finally perhaps even of the whole cultural system, while others will have a brief span of active life and will soon fade out of circulation. There are various mechanisms in action that may prolong or shorten the life span of a text, and some of them are completely accidental. For example, it is possible that an actress who will later become a major star has played the heroine in a film based on a mediocre novel, which will induce her fans-to-be to rediscover the book they would otherwise hardly have bothered to read. In any case, the status trajectory of a text, its trail through the operational memory (see below) of the cultural system,