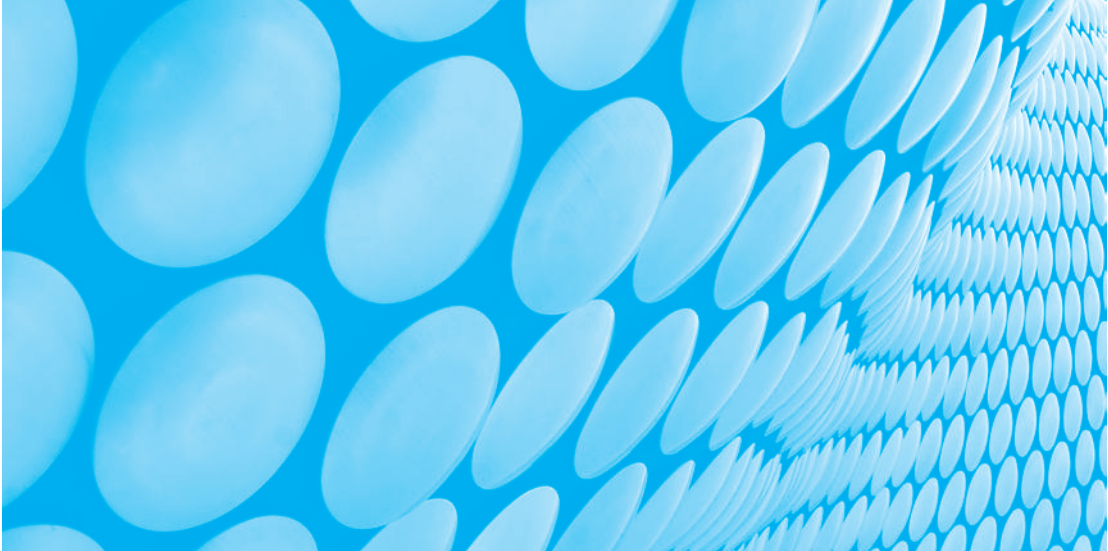




Culture and cultural studies

1.0 Introduction

Cultural studies is a new way of engaging in the study of culture. In the past many academic subjects – including anthropology, history, literary studies, human geography and sociology – have brought their own disciplinary concerns to the study of culture. However, in recent decades there has been a renewed interest in the study of culture that has crossed disciplinary boundaries. The resulting activity, cultural studies, has emerged as an intriguing and exciting area of intellectual inquiry that has already shed important new light on the character of human cultures and which promises to continue so to do. While there is little doubt that cultural studies is coming to be widely recognised as an important and distinctive field of study, it does seem to encompass a potentially enormous area. This is because the term ‘culture’ has a complex history and range of usages, which have provided a legitimate focus of inquiry for several academic

disciplines. In order to begin to delimit the field that this textbook considers, we have divided this chapter into four main sections:

- 1.1 A discussion of some principal *definitions* of culture.
- 1.2 An introduction to the *core issues* raised by the definitions and study of culture.
- 1.3 A review of some leading *theoretical accounts* that address these core issues.
- 1.4 An outline of *our view* of the developing field of cultural studies.

In introducing our book in this way, we hope to show the complexity of the central notion of culture and thereby to define some important issues in the field of cultural studies.

Learning objectives

- To understand different definitions of the concept of culture.
- To identify the principal issues in the study of culture.
- To learn about some of the leading theoretical perspectives in cultural studies.

1.1 What is culture?

The term ‘culture’ has a complex history and diverse range of meanings in contemporary discourse. Culture can refer to Shakespeare or Superman comics, opera or football, who does the washing-up at home or how the office of the President of the United States of America is organised. Culture is found in your local street, in your own city and country, as well as on the other side of the world. Small children, teenagers, adults and older people all have their own cultures; but they may also share a wider culture with others.

Given the evident breadth of the term, it is essential to begin by trying to define what culture is. Culture is a word that has grown over the centuries to reach its present broad meaning. One of the founders of cultural studies in Britain, **Raymond Williams** (p. 3), has traced the development of the concept and provided an influential ordering of its modern uses. Outside the natural sciences, the term ‘culture’ is chiefly used in three relatively distinct senses to refer to: the arts and artistic activity; the learned, primarily symbolic features of a particular way of life; and a process of development.

Culture with a big ‘C’

In everyday talk, culture is believed to consist of the ‘works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity’, thus culture is the word that describes ‘music, literature, painting and sculpture, theatre and film’ (Williams, 1983b: 90). Culture in this sense is widely believed to concern ‘refined’ pursuits in which the ‘cultured’ person engages.

Culture as a ‘way of life’

In the human sciences the word ‘culture’ has achieved wide currency to refer to the creation and use of **symbols** (p. 214) which distinguish ‘a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period or a group, or humanity in general’ (Williams, 1983b: 90). Only humans, it is often argued, are capable of creating and transmitting culture and we are able to do this because we create and use symbols. Humans possess a symbolising capacity which is the basis of our cultural being.

What, then, is a symbol? It is when people agree that some word or drawing or gesture will stand for either an idea (for example, a person, like a pilot), or an object (a box, for example), or a feeling (like contempt). When this has been done, then a symbol conveying a shared idea has been created. These shared ideas are symbolically mediated or expressed: for example, by a word in the case of ‘pilot’, by a drawing to convey the idea of a box or by a gesture to convey contempt. It is these meanings that make up a culture. A symbol defines what something means, although a single symbol may have many meanings. For example, a flag may stand for a material entity like a country and an abstract value such as patriotism. To study culture is thus to ask what is the meaning of a style of dress, a code of manners, a place, a language, a norm of conduct, a system of belief, an architectural style, and so on. Language, both spoken and written, is obviously a vast repository of symbols. But symbols can take numerous forms: flags, hairstyles, road signs, smiles, BMWs, business suits – the list is endless.

Given the way that we have discussed culture so far, it might be thought that culture is everything and everywhere. Indeed, some approaches to the study of culture take such a position, especially, for instance, those coming at the topic from a more anthropological point of view. Thus, the nineteenth-century anthropologist Edward Tylor (1871: 1) famously defined culture as ‘that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man [sic] as a member of society’. This definition underlines the pervasiveness of culture in social life. It also emphasises that culture is a product of humans living together and that it is learned. A similar idea informs the definition offered by the American poet and critic T.S. Eliot:

Key influence 1.1



Raymond Williams (1921–88)

Raymond Williams was a Welsh cultural analyst and literary critic. His 'serious' attention to 'ordinary culture' was a key influence on the development of the idea of cultural studies, of which he is normally seen as a founding figure.

Born into a Welsh working-class family, Williams studied at Cambridge before serving as a tank commander in the Second World War. He returned to Cambridge after the war to complete his degree. He taught for the Workers' Educational Association during the 1950s, before returning to Cambridge to take up a lectureship in 1961. He was appointed Professor of Drama in 1974.

Williams's earliest work addressed questions of textual analysis and drama and can be seen as reasonably conventional in approach, if not emphasis. His influence was enhanced and reputation made by two key books: *Culture and Society* (1958) and *The Long Revolution* (1961). The former re-examined a range of authors to chart the nature of the formation of culture as a response to the development of industrialism. The latter pointed to the democratic

potential of the 'long revolution' in culture. Williams distanced himself from the elitist and conservative perspectives of F.R. Leavis and T.S. Eliot in arguing for both socialist transformation and cultural democracy. Williams emphasised these themes in *Communications* (1962) which also contained some proto-typical media analysis. Television was the subject of the later *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (1974) which introduced the concept of 'flow'. From the 1960s on, Williams's work became more influenced by Marxism, resulting in *Marxism and Literature* (1977) and *Culture* (1981). His *The Country and the City* (1973a) greatly influenced subsequent interdisciplinary work on space and place. His vast corpus of work (including over 30 books) also addressed drama, cultural theory, the environment, the English novel, the development of language, leftist politics and, in the period before his death, Welshness. He was also a prolific novelist.

The impact of Williams's rather dense and 'difficult' writings was often in terms of his overall approach, cultural materialism, and emphasis rather

than in the detail of his analyses. His lifelong commitment to socialism, combined with the desire for cultural communication and democracy, was greatly attractive to a generation of leftists. His current status is enhanced by the use of his concept of structure of feeling to study various phenomena from literary texts to urban ways of life.

Further reading

Williams wrote a vast amount, so much so that his identity has been seen as that of 'writer'. The first reference is a revealing set of interviews, which combine the life and work.

Williams, R. (1979) *Politics and Letters: Interviews with New Left Review*, London: New Left Books.

Eldridge, J. and Eldridge, L. (1994) *Raymond Williams: Making Connections*, London: Routledge.

Inglis, F. (1995) *Raymond Williams*, London: Routledge.

Milner, A. (2002) *Re-imagining Cultural Studies: The Promise of Cultural Materialism*, London: Sage.

Culture ... includes all the characteristic activities and interests of a people. Derby Day, Henley Regatta, Cowes, the 12th of August, a cup final, the dog races, the pin table, the dart board, Wensleydale cheese, boiled cabbage cut into sections, beetroot in vinegar, nineteenth century Gothic churches, and the music of Elgar.

(Eliot, 1948, quoted in Williams 1963[1958]: 230)

Other approaches have tended to argue that some areas of social life are more properly thought of as political or economic than cultural and thus can in some

fashion be separated from culture. Thus, those who would define culture in the sense of 'arts and artistic activity' would tend to exclude some institutions and phenomena that others who accept the definition of 'way of life' would see as part of culture. There is little consensus on this matter but it is clear that it will be an issue in this book.

Culture in the sense of way of life, however, must be distinguished from the neighbouring concept of society. In speaking of society we refer to the pattern of social interactions and relationships between individuals and groups. Often a society will occupy a territory,

be capable of reproducing itself and share a culture. But for many large-scale, modern societies it may make more sense to say that several cultures coexist (not always harmoniously) within the society.

Process and development

The earliest uses of the word ‘culture’ in the late Middle Ages refer to the tending or cultivation of crops and animals (hence agriculture); a little later the same sense was transferred to describe the cultivation of people’s minds. This dimension of the word ‘culture’ draws attention to its subsequent use to describe the development of the individual’s capacities and it has been extended to embrace the idea that cultivation is itself a general, social and historical process (Williams, 1983b: 90–1).

The different senses in which the concept of culture can be used are illustrated in the following examples. A play by Shakespeare might be said to be a distinct piece of cultural work (sense: culture with a big ‘C’), to be a product of a particular (English) way of life (sense: culture as a way of life) and to represent a certain stage of cultural development (sense: culture as process and development). Rock ‘n’ roll may be analysed by the skills of its performers (culture with a big C); by its association with youth culture in the late 1950s and early 1960s (culture as a way of life); and as a musical form, looking for its origins in other styles of music and also seeing its influence on later musical forms (culture as a process and development).

In this book we shall consider all three of these different senses of culture. However, it is important to note that these definitions and their use raise a number of complex issues and problems for the analysis of culture which we introduce in the next part of the chapter.

1.2 Issues and problems in the study of culture

The three senses of culture identified in the previous part of this chapter have tended to be studied from different points of view. Hence, artistic or intellectual activity has commonly been the province of the

humanities scholar. Ways of life have been examined by the anthropologist or the sociologist, while the development of culture might seem to be the province of the historian using historical documents and methods. These disciplines have tended to approach culture in different ways and from different perspectives. However, as we shall demonstrate in this chapter, the special merit of a distinct cultural studies approach is that it facilitates the identification of a set of core issues and problems that no one discipline or approach can solve on its own. Let us explain what we mean through the identification and exemplification of these core questions. As you will see, they both start and finish with the issue of the relationship between the personal and the cultural.

How do people become part of a culture?

Culture is not something that we simply absorb – it is learned. In anthropology this process is referred to as acculturation or enculturation. In psychology it is described as conditioning. Sociologists have tended to use the term ‘socialisation’ to describe the process by which we become social and cultural beings. The sociologist Anthony Giddens (2006:163) describes socialisation as the process whereby, through contact with other human beings, ‘the helpless infant gradually becomes a self-aware, knowledgeable human being, skilled in the ways of the culture in which he or she was born’. Sociologists have distinguished two stages of socialisation. Primary socialisation usually takes place within a family, or family-like grouping, and lasts from birth until the child participates in larger and more diverse groupings beyond the family, usually beginning with school in Western societies. Primary socialisation involves such elements as the acquisition of language and a gendered **identity** (p. 142). Secondary socialisation refers to all the subsequent influences that an individual experiences in a lifetime. Psychology and its subdisciplines like **psychoanalysis** (p. 5) pay particular attention to childhood and the conditioning that relates to the acquisition of a gender and a sexuality. Gender refers to the social roles that different societies define as masculine or feminine. Sexuality refers to the desires and sexual orientation of a particular indi-

vidual. The founder of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, argued that masculinity and femininity and the choice of a sexual object are not directly related to biology, but

are a result of conditioning. Feminists have used Freud's theories to oppose the idea that men are naturally superior, even though Freud himself was not

Defining concept 1.1

Psychoanalysis

Psychoanalysis is the name given to the method developed by Sigmund Freud (1856–1939). Freud himself used his interpretative technique to analyse literature and art. Psychoanalytic theory has subsequently developed into a number of different schools, some of which have influenced **feminist** (p. 82), **postcolonial** (p. 143), **Marxist** (p. 65) and **postmodernist** (p. 295) cultural criticism. Critics who have used psychoanalytic ideas include members of the **Frankfurt School** (p. 75), **Julia Kristeva** (p. 149) and **Judith Butler** (p. 148).

Freud's method of interpretation is first developed in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900). He describes how symbols in dreams represent condensed or displaced meanings that, when interpreted, reveal the dreamer's unconscious fears and desires. In *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901), he showed how slips of the tongue and the inability to remember words are also symptoms of unconscious mental processes. Condensation, displacement and 'symptomatic' methods of interpretation have been deployed by critics to decode cultural texts. Psychoanalysis has been particularly influential in film criticism. Freud developed a tripartite theory of the mind: the id or unconscious; the ego, which adjusts the mind to external reality; and the super-ego, which incorporates a moral sense of society's expectations. Perhaps his most important work was on a theory of sexuality. The psycho-

analytic concept of sexuality posits a complex understanding of desire. The fixed binarism of masculine/feminine given by earlier biologicistic theories of sexual difference tended to assume an equally fixed desire by men for women and by women for men. In psychoanalysis, there is no presupposition that sexual desire is limited to heterosexual relations. Rather, the adaptable nature of desire is stressed and an important role is given to fantasy in the choice of sexual object. Freud's work was still partially attached to a theory of biological development.

The influential psychoanalytic critic, Jacques Lacan, argued that the unconscious is structured like language. In other words, culture rather than biology is the important factor. Lacan's work has been important for feminist critics, who have developed an analysis of gender difference using Freud's Oedipus complex. According to feminist psychoanalytic criticism, the context in which feminine sexuality develops is different to that of masculine sexuality. Men and women enter into different relationships with the symbolic order through the Oedipus complex. The Oedipus complex arises through the primary identification of both boys and girls with their mother. Paradoxically, it is the mother who first occupies the 'phallic' position of authority. The discovery that the mother does not hold as powerful a position in society as the father (it is the father who symbolises the phallus) creates the crisis

through which the boy and the girl receive a gendered identity. The boy accepts his 'inferior phallic powers', sometimes known as 'the castration complex', but with the promise that he will later occupy as powerful a position in relation to women as his father does. The girl learns of her subordinate position in relation to the symbolic order, her castration complex, but for her, there is no promise of full entry to the symbolic order; consequently her feeling of lack persists as a sense of exclusion (Mitchell, 1984: 230).

In cultural studies the theory of the unconscious has allowed a more subtle understanding of the relationship between **power** (p. 64) and the formation of subjectivity. While psychoanalysis has been found wanting in that it suggests but does not actually show how the social relates to the psychic, that suggestion has been the starting point for some of the most fascinating investigations in cultural studies.

Further reading

Mitchell, J. (1984) *Women: The Longest Revolution, Essays in Feminism, Literature and Psychoanalysis*, London: Virago.

Thwaites, T. (2007) *Reading Freud: Psychoanalysis and Cultural Theory*, London: Sage.

Weedon, C., Tolson, A. and Mort, F. (1980) 'Theories of language and subjectivity', in *Culture, Media, Language*, London: Unwin Hyman.

particularly sympathetic to **feminism** (p. 82). The concepts of acculturation and enculturation, conditioning and socialisation draw attention to the many and various social arrangements that play a part in the ways in which humans learn about meaning.

How does cultural studies interpret what things mean?

Anthropology and some forms of sociology see meaningful action, the understandings that persons attribute to their behaviour and to their thoughts and feelings, as cultural. This approach to culture refers to the shared understandings of individuals and groupings in society (or to the way of life sense of culture – see above). Some sociologists, for example Berger and Luckmann (1966), stress that human knowledge of the world is socially constructed, that is, we apprehend our world through our social locations and our interactions with other people. If it is the case that our understanding is structured by our social locations, then our views of the world may be partial. This view suggests that there is a real world but we can only view it from certain angles. Thus, our knowledge of the world is inevitably perspectival. The perspectival view of the world complements the issue of cultural relativism (see section 3.4). It emphasises the way that social roles and relationships shape the way we see and give meaning to the world, whereas cultural relativism stresses the way that habitual, taken-for-granted ways of thought, as expressed in speech and language, direct our understandings. An example of perspectival knowledge is the differing accounts of the dissolution of a marriage given by those involved and affected by it. The explanation given for the break-up of a marriage by one partner will rarely coincide with the explanation given by the other (Hart, 1976).

The sociology of knowledge, as this approach to understanding is known, suggests that the sense that we make of the world can be made intelligible through the examination of our social location. For example, it is sometimes proposed that one's view of the world is linked to class position, so that working-class people will have a different view of the world from upper-class people. Sociologists of knowledge do not propose that our beliefs can always be reduced to, or simply read off

from, our social location, but they do suggest that these world-views are cultural, and that culture has to be studied in relation to society. Moreover, the interpretation of culture in relation to social location introduces further issues of evidence and relativism. If knowledge is socially constructed, can there be such a thing as 'true' knowledge? If perceptions and beliefs are always relative to social location, then why should we believe any particular view, even the view of the person asserting this statement, since it too will be influenced by the person's location? In seeking to interpret a way of life of a different society or a different group in our own society, why should we believe one interpretation rather than any other? If we are to begin to adjudicate or evaluate different interpretations then we will need to consider the types of evidence offered for the particular interpretation. Interpretation of meaning is therefore a core issue in cultural studies, and it relates to how we understand the relationship between the past and the present.

How does cultural studies understand the past?

One hears much talk in England of the traditional nature of culture (see Box 1.1); England is seen by some to have a culture that stretches back over a thousand years. Within this context, culture in English studies has often been conceived in terms of influence and tradition. For T.S. Eliot (1932: 15), for example, 'no poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists'. More recently, English studies has begun to question the values of the canon, that is, those written texts selected as of literary value and as required reading in schools and universities. Texts that have been previously neglected have been introduced into school and university syllabuses. More women's writing, writing by minority groups in British society, non-British writing and popular fiction have been included in the canon. For example, the poems of Derek Walcott (St Kitts, Caribbean), the novels of Chinua Achebe (Nigeria) and those of Alice Walker (USA) are now regarded as deserving literary consideration. English studies has widened its outlook beyond the influence of other poets and writers to look

Box 1.1



Tradition and traditional

Derived from the Latin verb *tradere* meaning to pass on or to give down. Commonly used in cultural studies to refer to elements of culture that are transmitted (e.g. language) or to a body of collective wisdom (e.g. folk tales). As an adjective (traditional) it implies continuity and consistency. Traditions and traditional practices may be seen positively or negatively. Where the past is venerated, traditions may be seen as a source of legitimacy and value; in revolutionary situations the past may be viewed with contempt and seen as a brake upon progress.

The term 'tradition' has a number of different meanings, all of which are central to how culture is understood. It can mean knowledge or customs handed down from generation to generation. In this sense the idea, for example, of a national tradition can have a positive sense as a marker of the age and deep-rooted nature of a national culture. On the other hand, the adjective 'traditional' is often used in a negative or pejorative sense from within cultures like those of North America or Western Europe which describe themselves as modern. Here 'traditional', when used

to describe non-European cultures and societies, can mean 'backward' or 'underdeveloped', terms that assume that all societies must modernise in the same way and in the same direction. Cultural studies is always critical of this kind of imposition of the standards of one culture upon another to define it as in some way inferior. 'Traditional' can also refer to social roles in society which are often taken for granted, but which might be questioned in cultural studies: for example, what it is to be a mother or a father.

at social and historical factors affecting the production of texts. It is now common for critics to look at, for example, the position of women in the nineteenth century when considering the novels of the period. Critics like Edward Said (p. 115) and Gayatri Spivak have also looked at the history of European imperialism and asked how that history manifests itself in literature.

This particular example from the discipline of English shows that traditions are not neutral and objective, somehow waiting to be discovered, but are culturally constructed. In being constructed and reconstructed some things are included and others excluded. This reflects, according to many writers, patterns of the distribution of **power** (p. 64) in society. Let us attempt to clarify some of these points through another example.

The kilt and Highland dress are presented, both in Scotland and outside, as Scottish traditional costume. This garb is one of the most recognisable and visible components of Scottish culture and is worn by Scottish people at a variety of special occasions. It is thus presented to the non-Scots world as a component of Scottishness – the attributes of a particular place. It also functions in this manner for many Scots who

consider the wearing of the tartan to be a method of identification with their cultural heritage. However, it appears that the kilt as a traditional cultural form has been constructed and repackaged to meet some historically specific needs. David McCrone (1992: 184) has suggested that 'a form of dress and design which had some real but haphazard significance in the Highlands of Scotland was taken over by a lowland population anxious to claim some distinctive aspect of culture at a time – the late nineteenth century – when its economic, social and cultural identity was ebbing away'. Thus a widely accepted and representative cultural form is shown to have been far from universal but rather associated with a particular group at a specific moment in time. Furthermore, this means that the meaning of the kilt is constantly changing within Scottish society. For example, in the 1950s wearing a kilt was thought effeminate by certain sections of the younger generation; however, since the recent increase in Scottish nationalism the kilt has come back into fashion, and is often worn at occasions such as weddings.

Can other cultures be understood?

An issue of reliability of evidence is also raised through this example as it may be difficult to know precisely who wore the kilt and when. Further, it raises the problem of what has been termed ‘historical relativism’. What this draws attention to is the extent to which we, as contemporaries of the first decade of the twentieth-first century, dwell in a world that is sufficiently different from the worlds in which our predecessors lived that it may be very difficult for us to understand those worlds in the same way that they did. How well can we understand what was in the middle-class, lowland Scots person’s mind when he or she adapted and adopted Highland dress? There are some similarities between the issues raised under this heading and others thought more often to be associated with cultural relativism, which we discuss next.

Further to the difficulty of studying culture across history, there is the parallel problem of interpretation of cultures from different parts of the world or in different sections of our own society. To what extent is it possible for us to understand the cultures of other peoples in the way they do themselves? Will our understanding inevitably be mediated via the distorting prism of our own cultural understandings? These problems have always confronted anthropologists in their attempts to interpret the other worlds of non-European societies. Is it possible to convey adequately the evident seriousness that the Azande accord to the consultation of oracles (see Box 1.2) or the conceptions of time held by Trobriand Islanders (see Box 1.3), in texts designed for consumption by Western audiences who hold very different temporal conceptions and ideas about magic and witchcraft? Novelists, sociologists and journalists also face this problem in describing the ways of life of different groups in their own society. Many quite serious

Box 1.2



Azande

The Azande, an African people, live around the Nile–Congo divide. The classic work on their belief systems is *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* by E.E. Evans-Pritchard, published in 1937. The Azande believe that many of the misfortunes that befall them are caused by witchcraft (*mangu*). *Mangu* is inherited; the Azande believe that it has the form of a blackish swelling in the intestines, and it is this substance that, when activated, causes harm to others. Even though individuals may have inherited *mangu* they do not necessarily cause harm to others because it is only bad, anti-social feelings that set off witchcraft. As long as a person remains good tempered they will not cause witchcraft. Since witchcraft is the product of bad feelings, then a person who suffers a misfortune suspects those who do not like her or him and who have reason

to wish harm. The first suspects are therefore one’s enemies. There are five oracles that a Zande (singular of Azande) may consult in order to have the witch named. After an oracle has named the witch, the person identified is told that the oracle has named them and she or he is asked to withdraw the witchcraft. Usually named people protest their innocence and state that they meant no harm; if they did cause witchcraft it was unintentional. Evans-Pritchard states that Azande do not believe that witchcraft causes all misfortunes and individuals cannot blame their own moral failings upon it. Azande say that witchcraft never caused anyone to commit adultery. Witchcraft is not the only system of explanation among the Azande; they do recognise technical explanations for events: for example, a man is injured because a house collapses, but witchcraft attempts to

answer the question of why *this* house collapsed. All systems of explanation involve the ‘how’ of events and the ‘why’ of events; the house collapses because the wooden supports are rotten – this is the technical ‘how’ of explanation – but why did it collapse at a particular time and on a particular man?

The ‘why’ of explanation deals with what Evans-Pritchard calls the singularity of events: ‘why me?’, ‘why now?’ Religious explanations offer the answer that it was the will of God; scientific explanations speak of coincidences in time and space; agnostics may see the answer in chance; the Azande know that it is witchcraft. Evans-Pritchard comments that while he lived among the Azande he found witchcraft as satisfactory a form of explanation for events in his own life as any other.

Box 1.3

**Trobriand Islanders**

The Trobriand Islands are politically part of Papua New Guinea. The best-known works on the Trobriand Islands are by Malinowski but E.R. Leach has written on Trobriand ideas of time in 'Primitive calendars' (*Oceania* 20 (1950)), and this, along with other work, is discussed in *Empires of Time: Calendars, Clocks and Cultures* by Anthony Aveni, 1990.

The Trobriand calendar is guided by the moon: there are twelve or thirteen lunar cycles but only ten cycles are in the calendar; the remaining cycles are 'free time' outside the calendar. The primary event of the Trobriand calendar is the appearance of a worm which appears for three or four nights once a year to spawn on the surface of the water. There is a festival

(*Milamak*) in this month which inaugurates the planting season. The worm does not appear at exactly the same time every year and planting does not take place at exactly the same time every year so there is sometimes a mismatch between worm and planting. This situation is exacerbated because the Trobriand Islands are a chain and the worm appears at the southern extremity of the chain, so news of its appearance takes time to communicate. The consequence is that the festivals, and so the calendar, vary greatly in the time of their celebration from island to island. When the discrepancies are felt to be too great to be manageable there is a realignment and the calendar is altered to achieve consistency.

Trobriand reckoning of time is cyclical, associated with the agricultural year. Lunar cycles that are not connected to this activity are not recognised so there is time out of the calendar; a difficult notion to grasp in modern industrial societies where time is believed to be a natural and inevitable constraint upon activity. The Trobriand language has no tenses; time is not a linear progression that, once passed, cannot be regained; in the Trobriand system, time returns. Trobriand ideas of the nature of existence are not set in time but in patterns; it is order and patterned regularity that locates events and things, not time.

practical difficulties can arise from this problem. For example, one influential study of conversation (Tannen, 1990) suggests that the many misunderstandings that occur between men and women arise because what we are dealing with is an everyday version of the difficulties of cross-cultural communication. In the USA 'women speak and hear a language of connection and intimacy while men speak and hear a language of status and independence' (Tannen, 1990: 42). Differing conversational practices are employed by men and women. Tannen observes that in discussing a problem, women will offer reassurance whereas men will seek a solution. Women tend to engage in 'rapport-talk' while men are more at home lecturing and explaining. Men tend to be poorer listeners than women. According to Tannen, women engage in more eye contact and less interruption than men in conversation. Her argument is that men and women employ distinct conversational styles that she labels 'genderlects'. These styles are sufficiently different from each other that the talk between men and women might be appropriately regarded as a form of cross-cultural communication (see Chapter 2).

Hollis and Lukes (1982) include both historical and cultural relativism under the broad heading of 'perceptual relativism' and argue that there are two different dimensions to be examined. First, there is the degree to which seeing or perception is relative; that is, when we look at something or seek to understand it, do we actually see the same thing as another person looking at it? Second, there is the extent to which perception and understanding rely on language. These questions about perception remind us that, as students of culture, we must constantly think about who we are – where we come from and what our 'position' is – in order to understand who and what we are studying.

How can we understand the relationships between cultures?

This question of position raises another problem in terms of how we understand the relationships between cultures. One conventional way of understanding this is to see cultures as mutually exclusive blocs that may

interface, intersect, and interact along a boundary or 'zone of contact'. For example, it would be possible to consider the interactions between the Trobriand Islanders or the Azande and the Europeans who arrived as part of the process of **colonialism** (p. 143) (including, of course, the anthropologists who studied them and wrote about them). This way of thinking about culture often describes these relationships in terms of 'destruction' of cultures or their 'disappearance' as one culture 'replaces' or 'corrupts' another. A good example would be the fears of Americanisation as McDonald's hamburgers, Coca-Cola and Levis' jeans spread to Europe, Asia and Africa through processes of **globalisation** (p. 125).

However, this point of view is limited in certain ways. First, it is impossible to divide the world up into these exclusive cultural territories. As we have pointed out, culture is also a matter of age, gender, class, status – so that any such cultural bloc, defined in terms of nation, tribe or society, will be made up of many cultures. This means that we will also be positioned in relation to not just one culture but to many. Second, culture does not operate simply in terms of more powerful cultures destroying weaker ones. Since culture is a never-ending process of socially made meaning, cultures adapt, change and mutate into new forms. For example, the Trobriand Islanders took up the English game of cricket, but they did so in terms of their own war-making practices. So cricket did not simply replace other Trobriand games, it was made into a new **hybrid** (p. 126) cultural form that was neither English cricket nor Trobriand warfare. Finally, it might be useful to think about the relationships between cultures in terms of a series of overlapping webs or networks rather than as a patchwork of cultural 'territories' (see, for example, Chapter 9). This would mean that understanding the meaning of any cultural form would not simply locate it within a culture but would look at it in terms of how it fitted into the intersection between different cultural networks. For example, Coca-Cola has taken on different meanings in different parts of the world: signifying **neo-colonial** (p. 143) oppression in India (and being banned for some time), while it suggests freedom and personal autonomy to British-Asian young people in London. Its meanings cannot be controlled by the Coca-Cola company, although they try

through their advertising campaigns. Neither do their meanings simply involve the extension of an 'American' culture. Instead these meanings depend upon the location of the product in a complex network of relationships that shape its significance and value to differently positioned consumers.

Why are some cultures and cultural forms valued more highly than others?

In English studies, literature has traditionally been seen as part of high culture (sense: arts and artistic activity). Certain literary texts have been selected as worthy of study, for example the novels of Charles Dickens or the plays of Shakespeare. This process of selection has meant the simultaneous exclusion of other texts, defined as non-literary. It has also led to an emphasis on writing, to the detriment of other, more modern forms of cultural activity, for example film and television. In a further step such forms of literature or high culture are regarded by some to be culture itself. Other excluded forms of writing or texts are defined as simply rubbish, trash or, in another often derogatory phrase, as mass culture. This entails a judgement of value, which is often assumed to be self-evident. Thus some forms of culture are to be valued and protected and others written off as worthless and indeed positively dangerous. However, as we have already seen, such canons or traditions are themselves constructed. Furthermore, as Hawkins (1990) has maintained, things that are thought to be high culture and those defined as mass culture often share similar themes and a particular text can be seen as high culture at one point in time and popular or mass culture at another. The example of opera may be used to illustrate this point. In Italy opera is a popular and widely recognised cultural form, singers are well known and performances draw big audiences who are knowledgeable and critical. In contrast, opera in Britain is regarded as an elite taste and research shows that typically audiences for opera are older and are drawn from higher social classes than other forms of entertainment. Yet in 1990, following the use of *Nessun Dorma* from the opera *Turandot*, sung by Pavarotti, to introduce the BBC television coverage of the 1990 World Cup Finals, opera rocketed in public

popularity in Britain. In addition to increased audiences at live performances in opera houses, there were large-scale commercial promotions of concerts of music from opera in public parks and arenas. Television, video and compact disc sales of opera increased enormously and an album, *In Concert*, sung by Carreras, Domingo and Pavarotti, was top of the music charts in 1990. The example illustrates the point that it is often empirically difficult to assign cultural practices to neat conceptual divisions.

The question of boundaries between levels of culture and the justification for them is an area of central concern for cultural studies. Pierre Bourdieu (1984) (see Defining Concept 9.1, p. 259) has maintained that the boundaries between popular and high art are actually in the process of dissolving. Whether or not one accepts this view, it is clear that the study of boundaries and margins may be very revealing about cherished values which are maintained within boundaries. The relationships between cultural systems are a fruitful area for the study of the processes of boundary maintenance and boundary change, linked as these topics are to issues of cultural change and cultural continuity (sense: culture as a process of development).

Within social anthropology there is an established practice of demonstrating the value and viability of cultures that are often regarded by the relevant authorities as poor and impoverished or as anachronisms and, as such, ripe for planned intervention to bring about change. Studies by Baxter (1991) and Rigby (1985) have argued that nomadic pastoralism, that is a way of life in which people move with animals and in which animal products are the staple diet, is a wholly rational and efficient use of resources. Such peoples are able to live in inhospitable areas where cultivation is not possible and enjoy a rich cultural, social and political life. Despite this evidence there is pressure from development planners to enforce change through land policies that compel pastoralists to give up their traditional way of life and become settled cultivators or wage labourers. Similarly, Judith Okely in her study of gypsies (1983) has shown the complex richness of gypsy cultural beliefs and practices, identifying a set of core principles around which gypsy life is articulated and which gives meaning to all activities. Gypsies, like pastoralists, are under pressure to settle down and to

conform to prevailing ideas about a proper and fitting way of life. Both these examples draw attention to the issues of power and inequality in cultural and social life to which we turn in the next section of the chapter.

What is the relationship between culture and power?

Implicit in our discussions so far has been the issue of **power** (p. 64). Since it is a product of interaction, culture is also a part of the social world and, as such, is shaped by the significant lines of force that operate in a social world. All societies are organised politically and economically. Power and authority are distributed within them, and all societies have means for allocating scarce resources. These arrangements produce particular social formations. The interests of dominant groups in societies, which seek to explain and validate their positions in particular structures, affect cultures.

One of the ways in which groups do this is through the construction of traditions and their promulgation through the population. Thus it might be argued that the idea of a tradition of British Parliamentary democracy excludes other ideas of democracy and social organisation that are against the interests of the powerful. Likewise, tradition in English literature excludes and marginalises other voices. The definition of trash or mass culture might be seen to negate forms of culture that are actually enjoyed by oppressed groups.

However, another way of looking at this suggests that such mass or popular forms are actually used by those in power to drug or indoctrinate subordinate groups. Forms of popular culture can in this view be seen to be like propaganda. For example, one commentary on modern culture, that of the **Frankfurt School** (p. 75) of critical theory, argues that the culture industries engender passivity and conformity among their mass audiences. For example, in this type of analysis the relationship between a big band leader and his fans could be seen to mirror the relationship between the totalitarian leader and his followers. Both fans and followers release their tensions by taking part in **ritual** (p. 214) acts of submission and conformity (Adorno, 1967: 119–32).

Whatever view is adopted, it is clear that power and culture are inextricably linked and that the analysis of culture cannot be divorced from politics and power relations. Indeed, we would argue that this is a very important reason for studying culture and for taking culture seriously. However, the precise way in which forms of culture connect to power remains a complex issue requiring careful investigation.

How is 'culture as power' negotiated and resisted?

Given the interests of different groups in society, it is inevitable that cultural attitudes will always be in conflict. Thus, the process of negotiation is endemic to societies and cultural **resistances** (p. 170) occur in many areas of life. Four key areas of struggle and negotiation that have concerned cultural studies are around gender, 'race', class and age (for more on these categories see pp. 18–19 and Chapter 3). These concepts define social relationships which are often fraught. To take one area as an example, the concept of gender encompasses both how masculinity and femininity are defined (see pp. 4–6) and how men and women relate to one another. Gender definitions are points of struggle in many societies since what it is to be a man and what it is to be a woman are never fixed. Indeed, these definitions themselves are, in part, the product of a power struggle between men and women.

Feminist writers have been most influential in gender studies. Feminist discussion of gender might be divided broadly into three arguments: for equality, for commonality or universality, and for difference. The argument for *equality* emphasises the political idea of rights. Equality between men and women is defined by abstract rights, to which both sexes are entitled. Inequality can be defined by women's lack of rights, for example to vote or to equal pay. Negotiation here is around the concept of women's rights. The argument for *commonality or universality* stresses that although women may belong to very different social, geographical and cultural groups they share common or universal interests because of their gender. Negotiation here is around the fundamental inequality of women because of their subordination in all societies. The argument for *difference* is more complicated; it rejects

both ideas of simple equality and universality. Instead, it maintains that differences between men and women and between different groups of women mean that a concept of gender can never be abstracted out of a particular situation. Negotiation, therefore, while not denying inequality, will be around the specificity of differences. Critics of gender divisions struggle to redefine cultural constructions of gender. Women's movements, but also campaigns for lesbian and gay rights, seek to redraw the cultural boundaries of men's and women's experience. Such political movements are often drawn into conflict with the law and social and political institutions like religious organisations and political parties that do not wish the cultural support for their dominance to be eroded or destroyed. In these examples it can be seen that the wider frameworks of society (power and authority structures) influence and impose themselves on cultural belief and practice to affect outcomes. We have already introduced a number of other areas where culture can in some sort of way be held to be connected to relationships and patterns of power.

How does culture shape who we are?

The above examples demonstrate that struggle and negotiation are often around questions of cultural **identity** (p. 142). An example that gives the question of identity more prominence is the way in which the origins of English studies in the nineteenth century were closely linked to the growth of universal education. As a discipline English was, in the view of many commentators, designed to give schoolchildren a sense of a national culture (Batsleer *et al.*, 1985, as discussed in Ashcroft *et al.*, 1989). Literary texts were used to instil this sense. Consequently, although English literature was often presented as a proper study in itself, the way it was taught was often designed, consciously or unconsciously, to encourage a particular national identity, a sense of what it meant to be British. In teaching this sense of British identity, other national cultures or identities within Britain were either treated uncritically as part of English culture, or were left out of the canon.

Another effect of this process, which some writers have detected, was to infuse a pride in the British

Box 1.4



Conrad on Africa

The prehistoric man was cursing us, praying to us, welcoming us – who could tell? We were cut off from the comprehension of our surroundings; we glided past like phantoms, wondering and secretly appalled, as sane men would be before an enthusiastic outbreak in a madhouse. We could not understand because we were too far and could not remember because we were travelling in the night of first ages, of those ages that are gone, leaving hardly a sign – and no memories.

The earth seemed unearthly. We are accustomed to look upon the shackled form of a conquered monster, but there – there you could look at a thing monstrous and free. It was unearthly, and the men were – No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it – this suspicion of their not being inhuman. It would come slowly to one. They howled and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was the thought of their humanity – like yours – the thought of your

remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. Ugly. Yes, it was ugly enough; but if you were man enough you would admit to yourself that there was in you just the faintest trace of a response to the terrible frankness of that noise, a dim suspicion of there being a meaning in it which you – you so remote from the night of first ages – could comprehend. Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (1898); quoted in Chinua Achebe (1988: 6)

Empire. For example, the Nigerian writer and critic Chinua Achebe has criticised the way that the novel *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad is still often presented as a great example of English culture. The novel describes a nightmarish encounter with Africa from the European point of view (see Box 1.4). However, Achebe has demonstrated that the representation of African culture that it contains is partial, based on little knowledge and is thus grossly distorted. Consequently, to read the novel as an English or even a European (Conrad was Polish in origin) work of art is to receive a very one-sided view of European imperialism in Africa. Through such processes an English national identity was constructed which involved constructing African identities in particular ways: as irrational and savage ‘others’.

Identities are very often connected to place both locally and more widely. We may feel that we identify with a particular local area, a city, a region and a country and that the extent to which we place emphasis on one of these may depend on a context, for example, who we are talking to at any particular time. However, it is clearly the case that these identities can cause conflict and disagreement and that important issues in the study of culture concern the way in which such identi-

ties are constructed and how they reflect and inflect particular distributions of power.

Summary examples

In order to examine some of the ideas contained in section 1.2, two short examples are given below: the family and Shakespeare.

Example 1: The family

An examination of family life reveals some of the issues that we have identified in the study of culture. For instance, within a family adults have great power over the lives of children because human infants are dependent on adults for their survival for relatively long periods of time. One way of understanding family life is to examine relationships and processes in terms of dominant and subordinate cultures. This approach has been used extensively by many feminist writers who have used the concept of patriarchy to refer to the assemblage of cultural and material power that men enjoy *vis-à-vis* women and children (Campbell, 1988; Pateman, 1989). The period of dependence of children varies from culture to culture, both historically and contemporaneously, and a number of writers have

commented that the Western notion of childhood is a relatively recent concept (Aries, 1962; Walvin, 1982). Further, in many parts of the contemporary world it is a mistake to think of the lives of children in terms of childhood as it is understood in the West; this period of growth and learning is seen quite differently from that in Western societies. Caldwell (1982), writing of India, remarks that in Indian rural society there is the cultural belief and practice that wealth flows from children to parents as well as from parents to children. He comments that, typically in Western society, resources flow in a one-way direction from parents to children and parents do not expect young children to contribute to the material wellbeing of the family of origin. However, in many parts of the world children are valued, at least in part, for the contributions that they make to the domestic economies of family and household; there is what Caldwell calls a 'reciprocal flow' of goods and services between parents and even quite young children. For example, toddlers can join in gathering firewood and this is a valuable contribution in economies where this is the only fuel available for cooking and boiling water. This cultural view of children is significant in understanding responses to family planning projects. Caldwell argues that all too often Western cultural assumptions about family life and desirable family size direct the policy and goals of these projects. Looking beyond the English family to families in other parts of the world reminds us of the heterogeneity and diversity of culture and alerts us to the dangers for understanding in assuming that cultures and cultural meanings are the same the world over.

Indeed, even in Western societies there is much cultural diversity. Novels and academic studies point to the effects of class and power on family life. In the recent past criticisms have been levelled against some traditional reading for children because it portrays a middle-class view of family structures and relationships which is far removed from the experiences of many children. Accusations of sexism and racism in literature for children have also been made. These criticisms again draw our attention to the relationships between general, diffuse cultures and local, particular cultures. Although we may identify an English culture as distinct from, say, a French culture, it cannot be assumed that all English families have identical cul-

tures. This opens up the challenging issue of how particular local cultures relate to the broader, more general ones of which they may be thought to be a constituent part.

It is also clear that family structures and organisation change over time, not just chronological, historical time, but also structural time, that is as relationships between family members change as a consequence of age and maturation. In all societies, as children grow to adulthood the power of other adults over them diminishes. This occurs both as a result of physiological change (children no longer depend on their parents for food) and also as a result of cultural expectations about the roles of parents and children. These cultural expectations may be gendered; for example, the English idiom that describes adult children as 'being tied to their mother's apron strings' can be read as a general disapproval of adults who do not leave the immediate sphere of their mother. Yet this idiom is overwhelmingly applied to adult male children and thus expresses a view about the proper, expected relationships between adult males and their mothers. Men are expected to be free from the close influence of their mothers, whereas there is often felt to be an identity between adult women and their mothers. Variables such as the sex of children, the number of children and the age of the parents when children are born, all affect the course of family life. In Victorian England, when family size was bigger and life expectancy less than now, some parents had dependent children for all their lives – there was no time in which all their children had grown up and left home. These demographic and social factors greatly influence the course of family life and demonstrate not only the heterogeneity of culture but also the malleability of culture. All cultures are reproduced in specific circumstances; ideas and values are interpreted and understood in the light of local conditions. This last point brings us back to the issues of judgement and relativism in the understanding of cultural practice that we raised earlier in this section. A cultural approach to a common institution, in this case the family, demonstrates the power of cultural studies to generate a wide range and number of potential areas of investigation. Some of these have been alluded to in this example but you will be able to identify more.

Example 2: Shakespeare

The study of Shakespeare has always been central to English studies and to some constructions of English **identity** (p. 142). Traditionally, in English studies, Shakespeare's plays and Shakespeare's language have been presented as the essence of Englishness. They have been made to serve as the defining features of a homogenous and unchanging culture. Subsequent authors have often been judged in terms of how they fit into that tradition. Because of this connection between Shakespeare and national identity the position of these plays in schools has become an important issue. The argument is sometimes put forward that children must read Shakespeare in order to learn English and Englishness. Shakespeare's plays become valued over and above other forms of cultural production. As a result the teaching of Shakespeare, and English history, was also a part of **colonialism's** cultural project (p. 143).

However, cultural studies asks rather different questions about Shakespeare. Instead of taking Shakespeare's position for granted, it asks what the social position of the theatre was in Elizabethan times. Further, it asks how plays were written and produced in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Evidence that

shows a high degree of collaboration between playwrights and adaptation of plays on the stage changes the conception of Shakespeare as individual genius. He appears as part of a wider culture. Shakespeare is then placed historically rather than his plays being seen as 'timeless' or 'eternal'. The question of the audience is addressed both in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and now. This gives a sense of who the plays were intended for and how they have been received, further challenging the conception that his work is universal: that is, for everyone, all of the time. We might ask what groups of schoolchildren make of Shakespeare's plays depending on class, race and gender, or whether they have seen the plays in the theatre or in versions made for the cinema.

The timeless nature of Shakespeare can also be challenged by studies that show that the texts have been altered considerably over the years and that he was not always considered as important as he is now. Cultural studies looks at the changing conceptions of Englishness – and its relationships to the rest of the world – that caused Shakespeare to be rediscovered in the eighteenth century as the national poet. This extends from studying different versions of the plays to

Box 1.5



Troilus and Cressida

But when the planets
In evil mixture to disorder
wander,
What plagues and what portents,
what mutiny!
What raging of the sea, shaking
of earth!
Commotion in the winds! frights,
changes, horrors
Divert and crack, rend and
deracinate
The unity and married calm of
states
Quite from their fixure! Oh when
degree is shak'd,

Which is the ladder of all high
designs,
The enterprise is sick. How could
communities,
Degrees in schools, and
brotherhoods in cities,
Peaceful commerce from
dividable shores,
The primogenity and due of birth,
Prerogative of age, crowns,
sceptres, laurels,
But that degree stand in
authentic place?
Take but degree away, untune
that string,

And hark what discord follows.
Each thing meets
In mere oppugnacy: the bounded
waters
Should lift their bosoms higher
than the shores,
And make a sop of all this solid
globe;
Strength should be lord of
imbecility,
And the rude son should strike
his father dead
Troilus and Cressida I.iii.94–115

looking at the tourist industry in Stratford-upon-Avon. It can also involve studying the versions of Shakespeare that are produced in other parts of the world. These do not simply show the imposition of English cultural meanings, but the complex processes of negotiation within networks of cultural interaction which mean that Shakespearean history plays were vehicles for discussing political authority in the Soviet Union, and which recently brought a Zulu version of *Macbeth* from post-apartheid South Africa to the reconstruction of Shakespeare's Globe Theatre in London.

All of these processes of questioning and negotiation are of course political. They show that the interpretation of Shakespeare is a matter of power. This argument is developed by Margot Heinemann (1985) in her essay 'How Brecht read Shakespeare'. She gave the example of Nigel Lawson, Chancellor of the Exchequer in the late 1980s, who quoted from Shakespeare's play *Troilus and Cressida* (1601–2). Lawson used the quotation 'Take but degree away, untune that string/And hark what discord follows' to

argue that Shakespeare was a Tory. However, as Heinemann pointed out, the character who makes the speech, Ulysses, is in fact a wily, cunning politician, who is using the threat of social disorder to attain his own ends (see Box 1.5).

All of these questions and issues derive from adopting a rather different approach to the study of culture to that represented by English studies in its more conventional guises. They are the sorts of questions posed by those adopting a cultural studies perspective and are shaped by the core issues that we have identified. However, they also involve asking questions which lead us on to examining the theoretical perspectives used within cultural studies: what is the relationship between the social position of the audience (for example, race, class and gender) and the interpretation of the text? How can we understand the ways in which the meanings of Englishness (and their link to Shakespeare) and the meanings of Frenchness become defined as opposites? What ideas and methods can we use to interpret plays in their historical context or the



Figure 1.1 The rapid pace of social change raises issues of difference, identity and the impacts of technology and globalisation. These provide leading questions for contemporary cultural studies. (Indian woman taking photograph in Peacock Court.) (Source: ©Martin Harvey/Corbis.)

contemporary meanings of Shakespeare within schools? In the next section we examine some of the most influential ways of theorising culture.

1.3 Theorising culture

This section introduces theories of culture which attempt to address the issues and problems set out above and to unite them within frameworks of expla-

nation. The bringing together of diverse issues and problems into a single form necessarily involves a process of abstraction. Theorists move away from the detail of particular instances and look for connections in terms of general principles or concepts. For the student, this means that theories are often difficult to grasp at first sight, couched as they are in abstract language. It may help you to think of issues and problems we have just introduced as the building blocks of theories. But there is no escaping the fact that the

Defining concept 1.2

Structuralism and poststructuralism

Structuralism was an intellectual approach and movement which was very influential in the social sciences and the arts in the 1960s and 1970s. The basic idea of structuralism is that a phenomenon under study should be seen as consisting of a system of structures. This system and the relationship between the different elements are more important than the individual elements that make up the system.

The Swiss linguist de Saussure is regarded as the founder of structuralism. In his study of language, he drew attention to the structures (langue) that underpin the variation of everyday speech and writing (parole) and analysed the sign as consisting of a signified (concept) and signifier (word or sound), founding **semiotics** (p. 29) as the science of the study of signs. The emphasis on the structure to be found below or behind everyday interaction, or the variety of literary texts, was taken up by a number of (mainly French) writers working in different areas of the social sciences and humanities. Examples include: Lévi-Strauss (anthropology) in studies of kinship, myth and totemism; Lacan (psychoanalysis) who re-worked Freud,

arguing that the unconsciousness is structured like a language; **Barthes** (p. 96) (literary studies), who examined the myths of bourgeois societies and texts; **Foucault** (p. 20) (history and philosophy) who pointed to the way that underlying epistemes determine what can be thought in his archaeological method; and Althusser (philosophy), who drew on Lacan's re-working of Freud in a re-reading of **Marx** (p. 66) which emphasised the role of underlying modes of production in the determination of the course of history. Debate around Lacan was influential on the work in feminism of writers like **Kristeva** (p. 149) and Irigaray.

Poststructuralism developed partly out of critique of the binary divisions so often characteristic of structuralism. So, for example, it criticised the idea that there is actually a distinct structure underlying texts or speech, blurring such distinctions. Moreover, it is critical of some of the scientific pretensions of structuralism. Structuralism tended to work on the premise that the truth or the real structure could be found. Poststructuralism is more concerned with the way in which versions of truth are produced in texts and

through interpretation, which is always in dispute and can never be resolved. Poststructuralism therefore tends to be more playful in practice if not outcome. The work of Derrida and Baudrillard exhibits some of these poststructuralist ideas. Derrida shows how texts subvert themselves from within and Baudrillard explodes the neat oppositions of sign and signifier, use and exchange value.

Examples of structuralist and poststructuralist analyses can be found in cultural studies. More formal structuralist analyses have sought to find the hidden meanings of folk tales (Propp), James Bond (Eco), the Western film (Wright) and romantic fiction (Radway). Poststructuralist influence is more diffuse, but can be found especially in more literary forms of cultural studies, where the complexities of texts and their multiple meanings are interpreted.

Further reading

Hawkes, T. (1991) *Structuralism and Semiotics*, London: Routledge.

Wright, W. (1975) *Sixguns and Society*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

language of theory is abstract, and you may well find it difficult on first reading.

In this section we wish to outline the main features of some leading theoretical approaches in cultural studies. Broadly – and this is a caricature that can be filled out by looking at examples in the rest of the book – we start with functionalist and **structuralist** (p. 17) forms of understanding which suggest clearly defined, and often rather rigid, relationships between culture and social structure. From these we move on to theoretical approaches, which sometimes might still be called structuralist and are often influenced by **Karl Marx** (p. 66), that place emphasis on the understanding of culture and meaning through thinking about their relationships to political economy (for example, class structures, modes of production, etc.) and their importance within conflicts between differently positioned social groups. Finally we stress what are often called **poststructuralist** (p. 17) or **postmodern** (p. 295) theoretical approaches which retain a concern with politics (and some concern for economics) in explaining culture (see Chapter 6), but use a much more flexible sense of how cultures and meanings are made.

Culture and social structure

Sociologists often use the term ‘social structure’ to describe ‘the enduring, orderly and patterned relationships between elements of a society’ (Abercrombie *et al.*, 1984: 198). Society is often considered to be ordered, patterned and enduring because of the structures that underlie it. Just as a tall building is held together by the girders underneath the stone and glass exterior, so too society is held together by its distinct configuration of institutions (political, economic, kinship and so forth)

One influential version of this way of thinking can be seen in the work of the American sociologist Talcott Parsons. Parsons treats culture as necessary for the proper functioning of society. In general terms culture – that is, values, norms and symbols – provide the linchpin of Parsons’s solution to the problem of social order. This problem is an analytical issue concerning the sources of the enduring quality of social life – how is the regularity, persistence, relative stability and pre-

dictability of social life achieved? Parsons maintains that culture is the central element of an adequate solution to this problem because it provides values, the shared ideas about what is desirable in society (perhaps values like material prosperity, individual freedom and social justice), and norms, the acceptable means of obtaining these things (for example, the idea that honest endeavour is the way to success). Culture also provides language and other symbolic systems essential to social life. Parsons further maintains that culture is internalised by personalities and that individual motivation thus has cultural origins. Moreover two of society’s basic features, its economy and its political system, are maintained by culture. Hence there is an important sense in which culture ‘oils the wheels’ of society. In the functionalist view of Parsons, society, culture and the individual are separate but interrelated, each interpenetrating the other. Culture occupies a central place because on the one hand it is internalised by individuals and on the other it is institutionalised in the stable patterns of action that make up major economic, political and kinship structures of the society.

Social structure and social conflict: class, gender and ‘race’

The separation of culture and social structure is not limited to functionalist theorists. It appears also in the work of theorists who argued that conflict is at the core of society and who understand culture in terms of the structured relationships of politics and economics (or political economy). **Karl Marx** (p. 66), the nineteenth-century philosopher and revolutionary, and the social theorist **Max Weber** (p. 158) treated beliefs, values and behaviour as products of social and economic inequalities and power relationships. Although Marx’s ideas are very complex, some of his followers have argued that those who hold the means of production in society will control its ideas and values. The ruling ideas of a society (its forms of law, politics, religion, etc.) will be those of the dominant class. These ideas will be used to manage and perpetuate an unequal and unjust system. In this scheme, culture serves as a prop to the social structure, legitimising the existing order of things.

Box 1.6

**Subordination and patriarchy**

Subordination of women: a phrase used to describe the generalised situation whereby men as a group have more social and economic power than women, including power over women (Pearson, 1992). Men are dominant in society and masculinity signifies dominance over femininity in terms of ideas.

Patriarchy: originally an anthropological term that describes a social system in which authority is invested in the male head of the household (the patriarch) and other male elders in the kinship group. Older men are entitled to exercise socially sanctioned authority over other members of the household or kinship group,

both women and younger men (Pearson, 1992).

Patriarchy has been criticised by some feminists as too all-embracing a term to describe the different forms of male dominance in different societies.

Feminist (p. 82) theorists have also seen culture as a product of social conflict; but whereas Marxists see social conflict as between classes, feminists see gender relations as just as important. Two key terms in feminist theory are 'subordination' and 'patriarchy' (see Box 1.6). Both these terms describe how men have more social and economic power than women. Feminist theory focuses on the political and economic inequalities between men and women. However, because women have often been excluded from the mainstream of political and economic life, feminists have also emphasised the importance of studying culture as the place in which inequality is reproduced. Because it is within culture that gender is formed, feminists have studied culture in order to examine the ways in which cultural expectations and assumptions about sex have fed the idea that gender inequality is natural.

Culture and conflict are also linked in the study of 'race' and racism. The concept of 'race' is often put in inverted commas because 'race', like gender, is also a social rather than a biological category. Although people are often differently defined by 'racial' characteristics, there are always as many differences within a defined 'racial' group as between 'racial' groups (Fields, 1990: 97). Fryer (1984) has argued that racial prejudice is cultural in the sense that it is the articulation of popular beliefs held by a people about others who are felt to be different from themselves. Racism, however, articulates cultural difference with structured inequality, using perceptions of these differences to validate oppression. The argument is that cultural

domination is an essential element of economic and political control. Just as feminists contend that the cultural roles assigned to women (gendered roles) serve to account for their separate and unequal relationship with men, so critics of racism argue that prejudicial values and attitudes towards colonised peoples developed as European imperialists slaughtered them, took their lands and destroyed their cultures (Richards, 1990).

Culture in its own right and as a force for change

However, culture need not be seen as dependent upon and derivative of the economic or any other dimension of social structure. The celebrated case here is **Max Weber's** (p. 158) account of the part played by the Protestant ethic in explaining the origins of modern capitalism. Weber argues that the beliefs of the early Protestant sects played a key causal role in the establishment of the 'spirit' or culture of capitalism, and thereby contributed to development of the capitalist economic system. Many of the early Protestant groups subscribed to the teachings of Calvin's doctrine of predestination that maintained that the believer's eternal salvation was determined at birth and that no amount of good works could alter God's decision. This placed a tremendous psychological burden on believers who had no way of knowing whether they numbered among the Elect (those who achieve eternal salvation in the life hereafter). The practical solution offered by the Protestant

religion to the anxiety thus generated lay in the notion of vocation: the believer was instructed to work long and hard in an occupation in order to attest his/her confidence and conviction that Elect status was assured. Later, the doctrine was relaxed so that systematic labour within a vocation and the material prosperity that accompanied it came to be seen as a sign of Election. The consequences of these beliefs and

related restrictions on consumption and indulgence was (a) to introduce a new goal-orientated attitude towards economic activity to replace the diffuse attitudes that had persisted through the Middle Ages, and (b) to facilitate the process of capital accumulation. Weber of course was well aware that a number of factors other than the cultural contributed to a phenomenon as complex as capitalism (Collins, 1980).

Key influence 1.2



Michel Foucault (1926–84)

Michel Foucault was a French philosopher and historian – indeed these two categories or identities become blurred together in his writing and thought – who has had a dramatic and far-reaching impact on cultural studies through his work on the connections between **power** (p. 64), knowledge and subjectivity.

Foucault's varied career took him through several disciplines – including philosophy and psychology – and various countries – he worked in France, Sweden, Poland, Tunisia and Germany before taking up a position at France's premier academic institution, the Collège de France, in 1970. Significantly, his job in Paris was, at his suggestion, a professorship in History of Systems of Thought and in this we can trace the themes of much of the work that he undertook from the 1950s through into the 1980s.

Foucault's early work traced changing modes of thought in relation to 'psychological' knowledges. His book *Madness and Civilisation* (1961) traced the relationship between madness and reason; reading the changing reactions to madness, and the incarceration of the mad, in terms of thinking about rationality as they changed from the medieval period, through the Enlightenment's Age of

Reason, and into the nineteenth century. The issues that it raised were explored in varied and changing ways in his subsequent work. Careful attention to the changing patterns of knowledge produced *The Birth of the Clinic* (originally published in French in 1963), *The Order of Things* (French original 1966) and *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (French original 1969). Indeed, he used the term 'archaeologies' to describe all these projects. The connections between knowledge and power which the treatment of the insane had revealed were further explored in relation to other marginalised groups in his *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (originally published in French in 1975), his edited editions of the lives of the murderer Pierre Rivière (1975) and the hermaphrodite Herculine Barbin (1978), and his three books on *The History of Sexuality* (originally published in French: Volume I 1976, Volumes II and III 1984). In all of these studies – which he called genealogies – he used theories of **discourse** (p. 21) to trace the changing ways in which power and knowledge are connected in the production of subjectivities and **identities** (p. 142).

Foucault's impact has been academic. He has changed the ways in

which we think about power, knowledge and subjectivity, encouraging us to look at the ways in which they are connected and the ways in which they change from context to context. In emphasising that 'Nothing is fundamental. That is what is interesting in the analysis of society', he has encouraged us to think about the ways in which things – power relations, ways of thinking, and ways of understanding ourselves and others – could be different. This means that his influence has also been political. His attention to the forms of power which shape institutions and subjectivities has been influential in, for example, campaigns over prisoners' rights and gay rights.

Further reading

- Foucault, M. (1980) *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon, Brighton: Harvester Press.
- Kritzman, L.D. (ed.) (1988) *Michel Foucault: Politics, Philosophy, Culture. Interviews and Other Writings 1977–1984*, London: Routledge.
- Rabinow, P. (ed.) (1984) *The Foucault Reader*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Defining concept 1.3

Discourse

Discourse is a way of thinking about the relationship between **power** (p. 64), knowledge and language. In part it is an attempt to avoid some of the difficulties involved in using the concept of **ideology** (p. 35). It is a way of understanding most associated with the work of the French philosopher and historian **Michel Foucault** (p. 20).

For Foucault a 'discourse' is what we might call 'a system that defines the possibilities for knowledge' or 'a framework for understanding the world' or 'a field of knowledge'. A discourse exists as a set of 'rules' (formal or informal, acknowledged or unacknowledged) which determine the sorts of statements that can be made (i.e. the 'moon is made of blue cheese' is not a statement that can be made within a scientific discourse, but it can within a poetic one). These 'rules' determine what the criteria for truth are, what sorts of things can be talked about, and what sorts of things can be said about them. One example that Foucault uses which can help us here is the imaginary Chinese encyclopaedia about which the Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges has written a short story. Foucault uses this to challenge our ideas about the inherent truthfulness and rationality of our own classification systems and scientific discourses. In the encyclopaedia:

[A]nimals are divided into: (a)

belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) *et cetera*, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies.

(Foucault, 1970: xv)

Foucault's aim is to problematise the relationship between words and things. He suggests that there are lots of ways in which the world can be described and defined and that we have no sure grounds to choose one over the others. In turn this also means that he is dedicated to recovering those ways of knowing that have been displaced and forgotten.

Discourse is also about the relationship between power and knowledge. Foucault (1980) argues that we have to understand power as something productive. For example, it is not in catching a criminal that power lies but in producing the notion of 'the criminal' in the first place. As he says: 'There is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations' (Foucault, 1977: 27). To continue the example, it is the body of knowledge – the discourse – that

we call 'criminology' that produces 'the criminal' (and, in the past, now forgotten figures like 'the homicidal monomaniac') as an object of knowledge, and suggests ways of dealing with him or her. The criminal, the criminologist, the policeman and the prison are all created together 'in discourse'.

This does not mean that the world is just words and images. Foucault is keen to talk about the institutions and practices that are vital to the working of discourse. If we think about medical discourse we soon realise that the forms of knowledge and language that make it up are inseparable from the actual places where these discourses are produced (the clinic, the hospital, the surgery) and all the trappings of the medical environment (white coats, stethoscopes, nurses' uniforms) (see Prior, 1988).

Further reading

Foucault, M. (1980) *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon, Brighton: Harvester.

Purvis, T. and Hunt, A. (1993) 'Discourse, ideology, discourse, ideology, discourse, ideology ...', *British Journal of Sociology*, 44, 473–99.

His intention was to show how ideas can be 'effective forces' (Weber, 1930: 183) in the historical development of societies. Culture (here in the form of religious ideas) can shape as well as be shaped by social structure.

A more interwoven view of the relationship between culture and society is shown in the work of Mary Douglas and **Michel Foucault** (p. 20). They both stress in their writings that our understanding of particular objects relates as much to the way we think about those

objects as to any qualities those objects may have in themselves. There is a reciprocal relationship between thought and the object(s) of thought: a two-way process where objects have qualities that make an impression upon us, but that impression is influenced by the ways in which we have been conditioned to think about that object. Thought and object are, then, inseparably linked but this does not mean that we always think in the same way about things and that ideas never change. It does mean that change is the outcome of reciprocal relationships, not a uni-directional causality from structure to culture. This means that culture may influence structure, as well as structure influencing culture. The recognition that culture is a force for change (not simply the object of change) leads to the belief that culture can be examined as a system in its own right. For example, in *Purity and Danger* Mary Douglas (1966) argues that ideas about dirt and hygiene in society have a force and a compulsion, not simply because they can be related to the material world through ideas about contamination, germs and illness, but because they are part of a wider cosmology or world-view. Dirt and hygiene are understood within a culture not just in terms of their relation to disease, but also in terms of ideas of morality, for example moral purity versus immoral filth. Thus, a cultural understanding of dirt will have to take into account the meaning of dirt in more than just a medical sense. It will have to understand dirt's place historically, within a specific culture. The ordering and classifying of events which result from ideas about the world gives meaning to behaviour. The state of being dirty is thus as much the product of ideas as it is of the material world.

In turn, Foucault argues that social groups, identities and positions – like classes, genders, races and sexualities – do not pre-exist and somehow determine their own and other cultural meanings. They are produced within **discourses** (p. 21) which define what they are and how they operate. So, for Foucault, even though there have always been men who have sex with men, there was no 'homosexual' identity, and no 'homosexual sex' before that identity and the figure of the 'homosexual' were defined in medical, psychological and literary texts at the end of the nineteenth century. That those discourses about homosexuality both produced moves to regulate male sexuality – and therefore

defined more clearly a group of homosexual men – and provided the basis for positive identification with that term on the part of some of those men, meant that 'homosexuality' came to have a significant place within the social structure. In Foucault's version of things there is no determinate relationship between social structure and culture. Instead there is a flexible set of relationships between **power** (p. 64), discourse and what exists in the world.

In considering theoretical accounts of the relation of culture and social structure we have demonstrated the rigid determinism of the functionalists; the strong connections between cultural struggles and the social relations of class, race and gender made by Marxists and feminists; and the importance of culture in reciprocally shaping social structures and social positions and identities argued by Foucault. These introductory remarks will be taken further in subsequent chapters that examine the issue they raise in more detail

1.4 Conclusion

What, then, is cultural studies? Throughout this chapter we have stressed the linkages between something that we have called cultural studies and the disciplines of sociology, history, geography, English and anthropology. We have discussed a set of central concerns for these disciplines, arguing that, given their common interests in culture, there are issues and problems that they all must address. These central concerns we call the core issues and problems in the study of culture. The shared interest in the topic of culture and the recognition of common themes brought practitioners from different disciplines together in the belief that it is through cooperation and collaboration that understanding and explanation will develop most powerfully. This clustering of different disciplinary perspectives around a common object of study offers the possibility of the development of a distinctive area of study characterised by new methods of analysis. It is this configuration of collaborating disciplines around the topic of culture that we see constituting both the substance and the methods of cultural studies. The arena in which this takes place can be labelled an 'inter-

discursive space', capturing the fluidity and focus that characterise cultural studies and contrasting the emergent, innovatory themes in substance and method that arise out of collaboration with the traditional themes of single disciplines. The metaphor of space also draws attention to the permeable nature of cultural studies: there are no fixed boundaries and no fortress walls; theories and themes are drawn in from disciplines and may flow back in a transformed state to influence thinking there.

Richard Johnson (1986) has pointed out the dangers of academic codification in regard to cultural studies, suggesting that its strength lies in its openness and hence its capacity for transformation and growth. He argues that cultural studies mirrors the complexity and polysemic qualities of the object of its study, culture. The power of culture arises from its diffuseness: the term is used where imprecision matters, where rigidity would destroy what it seeks to understand. Consciousness and subjectivity are key terms in Johnson's portrayal of cultural studies. Consciousness is used in the Marxist sense of knowledge and also in a reflexive sense to give the idea of productive activity. Subjectivity is used to refer to the construction of individuals by culture. Combining these two concepts leads Johnson (1986) to describe the project of cultural studies as being to 'abstract, describe and reconstitute in concrete studies the social forms through which human beings 'live', become conscious, sustain themselves subjectively'.

This project has been interpreted in cultural studies in terms of three main models of research: (a) production-based studies; (b) text-based studies; (c) studies of lived cultures. As you can see, there is a close correspondence here with the three senses of culture that we elaborated earlier in this chapter. Each one of these areas has a different focus; the first draws attention to processes involved in and struggles over the production of cultural items; the second investigates the forms of cultural product; the third is concerned with how experience is represented. Johnson points to the necessarily incompleteness of these ventures; like the wider arena in which they operate, they are fed by interactive communication. Each one gives to and takes from the others.

In summary, we suggest approaching cultural

studies as an area of activity that grows from interaction and collaboration to produce issues and themes that are new and challenging. Cultural studies is not an island in a sea of disciplines but a current that washes the shores of other disciplines to create new and changing formations.

Recap

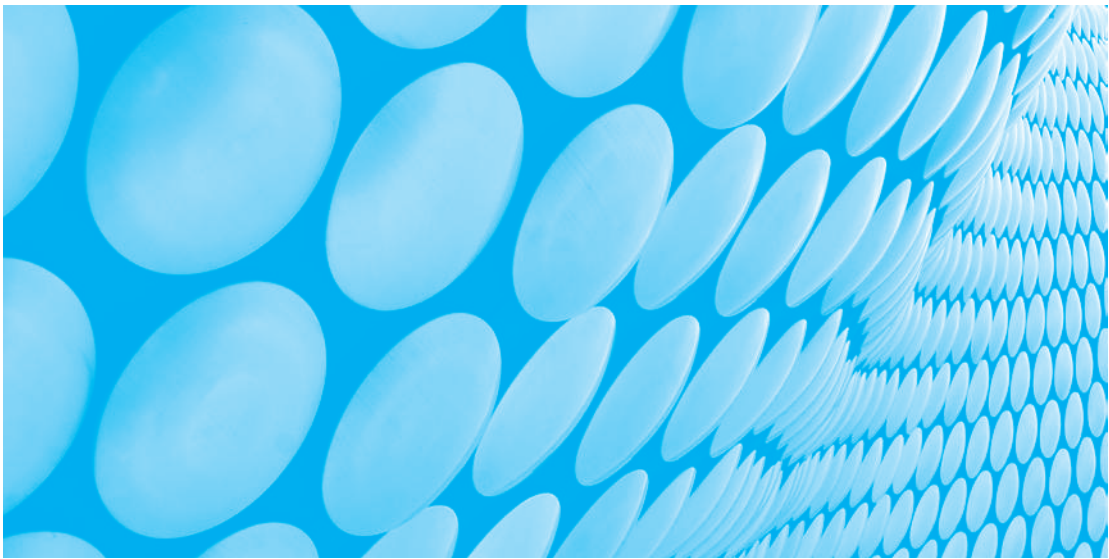
- In cultural studies the concept of culture has a range of meanings which includes both high art and everyday life.
- Cultural studies advocates an interdisciplinary approach to the study of culture.
- While cultural studies is eclectic in its use of theory, using both structuralist and more flexible approaches, it advocates those that stress the overlapping, hybrid nature of cultures, seeing cultures as networks rather than patchworks.

Further reading

Although they are not always easy reading, the best place to begin exploring the issues raised in this chapter is to look at the acknowledged early 'classics' of cultural studies: Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* (1958), Raymond Williams' *Culture and Society 1780–1950* (1963) and E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1968). Each of these works has had a profound influence over the subsequent development of cultural studies. Important stocktakings of the field's development are Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg's *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (1988) and the substantial collection edited by Grossberg, Cary Nelson and Paula Treicher, *Cultural Studies* (1992). John Storey's *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction* (2006) connects debates about popular culture to the concerns of cultural studies. Richard Johnson's 'What is cultural studies anyway?' (1986) critically charts the possibilities of three models of cultural studies (production-based studies, text-based studies and studies of lived cultures). Some of these ideas feed into a recent collaborative work by Johnson, Deborah Chambers, Parvati Raghuram and Estella Tincknell (2004) *The Practice of Cultural Studies*. Distinctive takes on the topic matter of cultural studies are provided in David Inglis and John Hughson *Confronting Culture* (2003) and by

Angela McRobbie in *The Uses of Cultural Studies* (2005). A good guide to key concepts in cultural studies is provided by Tony Bennett, Lawrence Grossberg and Meaghan Morris (2005). For original recent work in cultural studies, the reader

may wish to consult the following journals: *Cultural Studies*, *New Formations* and *Social Text*. You will probably need access to a university library to read these periodicals.



Culture, communication and representation

2.0 Introduction

Chapter 1 presented an introduction to the ideas of culture and structure. Here in Chapter 2, we develop these discussions in relation to key debates and theories on communication and representation.

Communication is the process of making meaning. It is how one individual (or a word, object, sign, gesture or similar) conveys meaning to another individual – be that meaning intentional or not. Significantly, this process of communication also involves **representation** (p. 43), in that meaning is *represented* through objects or actions. For example, certain letters written on a page may spell the word ‘cat’ and those three small shapes (letters) placed together convey the meaning, and therefore represent, the idea of a cat. However, what is significant about the study of communication and representation for cultural studies, is the suggestion that it is through language and communication that we define and shape our social and cultural world. It is through language and communication that we

make sense of our world, and convey these meanings to others, through which we develop shared meanings and shared cultures, which shape our understanding and interpretation of our whole social world.

This idea of ‘making meanings’ is considered in the first of three main sections within this chapter. This first main section (*the organisation of meaning*) begins by considering how meanings can be defined by the nature or form of communication, and in particular, considers *spoken, written and visual texts*. Within this section we present an introduction to the ideas of semiotics and the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (the former discussed in more detail later in Chapter 4), which suggest that language is a structured system that shapes our cultures. This idea is developed further in the discussion that follows of *structuralism and the order of meaning*. The ideas that meanings are ‘rigid’ is challenged in the following discussion of *hermeneutics and interpretation*. Next, this section considers the role of the *political economy, ideology and meaning*, which suggests that meanings are defined through (dominant)

ideologies. This section concludes with discussions of *poststructuralism and the patterns of meaning* and *post-modernism and semiotics*, which both question the idea of meanings as structured and as shaped along social 'group' lines.

In the second main section of this chapter we move on to consider *language, representation, power and inequality* in more detail. This begins with a consideration of *language and power*, before considering the way language has been used in relation to *class, race and ethnicity* and *gender*.

The third and final main section of this chapter focuses more specifically on forms of *mass communication and representation*, and more specifically the *mass media and representation*. In this, we consider three examples of mass media representations – of *race and ethnicity*, *gender* and *celebrity*. This section, and chapter, then concludes with a consideration of *audiences and reception*. Within this discussion we focus on the important and influential work of **Stuart Hall** (p. 55) on encoding/decoding, before finally finishing off with a consideration of how this work is located with Abercrombie and Longhurst's (1998) theorisation of paradigms of audience research.

Learning objectives

- To understand the complexity of processes of communication and representation.
- To understand how language, communication and representation shape our social world and cultures.
- To reflect on the powerful role language plays in shaping our understanding of social factors such as class, gender and ethnicity.
- And also to understand how social and cultural 'groupings' such as ethnicity, gender and celebrity are presented and understood through and via the mass media.

2.1 The organisation of meaning

Raymond Williams (p. 3) argues that the patterning of meaning is a crucial starting point for cultural analysis:

[I]t is with the discovery of patterns of a characteristic kind that any useful cultural analysis begins, and it is with the relationships between these patterns, which sometimes reveal unexpected identities and correspondences in hitherto separately considered activities, sometimes again reveal discontinuities of an unexpected kind, that general cultural analysis is concerned.

(Williams, 1965: 47)

However, there are many different ways in which this search for patterns of meaning can proceed. In particular, this section begins by considering how meaning can be shaped by the form of communication used, this is then followed by discussions of communication and meaning, structuralism and meaning, hermeneutics and interpretation, the political economy and ideology, poststructuralism, and postmodernism.

Spoken, written and visual texts

A 'text', quite simply, is any cultural item that can be 'read' or interpreted. These can be (semi)permanent, such as books, letters or television shows, or can be more temporal such as someone speaking or watching a live football match. In particular, the 'openness' and degree of meaning that can be read into a text is a crucial consideration of poststructuralism (and this is considered further, later in this chapter). However, here we wish to highlight how the nature or form of a text can significantly contribute to the meaning derived from it. In particular, this can be summed by Marshall McLuhan's famous dictum that 'the medium is the message'. By this McLuhan (1964) is suggesting that too often we focus on the content of a message, but overlook its context, form or the medium through which it is delivered – and it is these which are crucial in determining what the content (message) is.

A significant contributor to the meaning of a text is the form that this takes; such as spoken, written or visual texts. Of course, to some degree this is a false distinction, as forms of communication often blur with each other. For instance a person talking (speech), will often use their hands, face and body to gesture (visual) and might also be wearing a t-shirt with writing on, which will also convey (written) meaning. However, it is important to realise that meaning is conveyed differently depending on the form of the medium or message carrier.

Spoken language first developed as sounds made to accompany gestures, which through use, developed into more elaborate codes (Newsom, 2007: 57). However, the development of spoken language should not be seen as a natural uncontested process of evolution. The history of any language is a history of contest, conflict and struggle. For instance, the 'English' language is in origin an Anglo-Frisian (i.e. Germanic) language first brought to Great Britain probably in the fifth century. This 'imported' language combined with Celtic dialects to form 'old English', which over the centuries was adapted and changed, primarily due to successive invasion, such as from (Norse) Vikings and (Franco) Normans – each bringing, and at times imposing, their own languages.

What we have come to view as 'Standard British English' developed primarily as a merchant dialect in England in the Middle Ages. With the continued growth in importance of merchants, trade and business this dialect was increasingly used in the development of institutions, such as the law, government and financial institutions, facilitating the spread of this dialect and its common acceptance (Schirato and Yell 2000). This then becomes accepted as the 'correct' way to speak, with all other dialects being rejected, and viewed as 'incorrect' if not 'vulgar' (Schirato and Yell 2000). Then (just as invaders had done in Britain) the rise of the British Empire from the fifteenth century onwards sees the imposition of this language on many nations around the world; who in turn have added to the use and development of this.

Still today *how* we speak is very important. For instance, in the UK there continues to be an emphasis of speaking 'correctly' (what is sometimes referred to as 'The Queen's English'), and Shnukal (1983, cited in

Schirato and Yell, 2000) suggests that this prioritisation of one form of dialect, and seeing all other as 'bastardised' or 'ungrammatical', is a form of linguistic racism – a point developed further, later in this chapter (p. 46).

Spoken language also has complexities in meanings beyond the actual words spoken themselves. For instance, the meaning of spoken words can be greatly influenced by tone, pitch, speed and volume – and this is sometimes referred as 'paralanguage' (Schirato and Yell, 2000). Speech will also often be punctuated by the use of noises or what Goffman (1981) referred to as 'response cries' such as 'ouch' (to being hit) or 'oops' (to a minor accident). Speech, and the meanings associated with it, are also frequently accompanied by non-verbal forms of communication, such as facial expression or gestures, and these have a very important role in communication and can significantly alter the meaning of what is being spoken. Also, for many, such as some who are hearing impaired, non-verbal gestures constitute the main form of communication, but even here, non-verbal communication (such as sign language) can be manipulated in subtle ways to convey different meanings and emotions.

Goffman (1959) also highlights how social interaction between people is shaped by their social status; such as people's behaviour and speech patterns may alter if they are talking to someone perceived to be more or less powerful than themselves. For Goffman social interaction was a social performance similar to acting on a stage, where people will also carefully consider how they are perceived by others and alter their behaviour and what they say accordingly – and Goffman refers to this as 'impression management'.

Turning to written language, it is evident that this first developed as symbolic, usually artistic, representations (such as cave paintings and later hieroglyphics) of aspects of the world, but did not relate directly to spoken words. The earliest written language that was also spoken was probably Sanskrit, which was first used in India in the fourth and fifth centuries BC (Newsom, 2007). Writing can be understood as a technology, which allows communication at distance. However, written language often lacks the same ability to convey the subtle meanings and variations that can be conveyed through paralanguage. To convey subtle

meanings, written language must rely on emphasis and punctuation, such as exclamation or question marks, or even emoticons (also known as ‘smileys’), which are particularly common in Internet chat-rooms/messaging and emails, and use punctuations to represent faces and emotions such as :-) (smile) :-((sad/sulk) ;-) (wink) :-o (shock) :-P (tongue poking).

Written language is a form of communication that negates some of the unequal power relations associated with speech. For instance, it is often easier to tell a powerful person something in a letter than face-to-face. However, written words still involve some of the social conventions and role taking associated with speech. For instance, a letter writer will write in a very different style if they were writing to their mother, lover or boss. Written language styles also differ in various forms of document. For instance, legal, academic or scientific documents, comic books, novels, love letters and newspapers, may all be written in the same language, but will often use very different writing styles and techniques – and these will often be shaped by the **ideologies** (p. 35) or **discourses** (p. 21) of both the writer and the conventions associated with that type of document/publication. Though all texts (including written words) are open to multiple readings/interpretations by their audiences, it is evident that most texts will have a ‘preferred reading’ – in other words a ‘dominant’ meaning, which was intended by the author.

Communication can also take the form of visual communication. A full discussion of visual culture is provided later (in Chapter 10), but it is important to acknowledge here the powerful role of visual representations (such as painting, photographs and television) as a form of communication. Visual representations, often give the impression of being neutral (after all, many would argue that ‘seeing is believing’) and lacking in the ideology or discourses associated with spoken or written language. However, visual imagery is just as prone to, and shaped by, ideologies and discourses as written or spoken texts. For instance, paintings will be painted to portray particular meanings or sentiments, and will focus on particular subjects (and not others). Similarly, photographs only show particular angles or perspectives, they are frequently ‘posed’, if not ‘set-up’, they can then be edited, re-shot, touched up, and certain shots excluded in preference to

others. And this is particularly the case in the mass media, which is in the business of image ‘creation’ (rather than presentation). Hence, it is important that visual images are seen as a **representation** (p. 43), and not *presentation*, of the world – and this point is taken up later in this chapter.

Communication and meaning

As already suggested the term communication refers to the process of making meaning. For instance, at its simplest, an individual speaks a word, which is heard and interpreted by a second person and this conveys a meaning to the listener. Similarly, an individual may wear a t-shirt or a hat, which conveys meaning to an observer – for example, that the wearer is the supporter of a particular sport team – or the meaning conveyed may be unintentional, such as the receiver of the message may think that the person in the hat or t-shirt looks silly or unfashionable.

However, this was not the original use of the term ‘communication’. Gunther Kress (1988) in *Communication and Culture* suggests that the term communication came into popular usage first in the nineteenth century to refer to physical means of connection, such as railroads, roads and shipping. However, it was with the development of new technologies, such as the telegram, and later the radio and telephone, that the term ‘communication’ became more commonly used to refer to the delivery of information, rather than physical objects.

The origins of the term communication (as a simple process of passing on an object) strongly influenced early considerations of the communications process. In particular, one of the earliest studies of telecommunications was conducted by Claude Elwood Shannon who worked for the Bell telephone corporation in America in the 1940s. Shannon developed a mathematical model of communication that was concerned with the most effective way of transmitting information, which attempted to eliminate any disruption of the original message. This disruption in the transfer of a message Shannon referred to as ‘noise’. Therefore, this early study of communication processes was primarily concerned with the transmission and reception of a

Defining concept 2.1

Semiology and semiotics

The study (or science) of 'signs' is known in Europe as 'semiology' (a term coined by Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913), a Swiss linguist) and in North America as 'semiotics' (a name devised by C.S. Peirce (1839–1914) for his independently developed philosophical system that shared many common premises with de Saussure's).

The simplest way to define what a sign is, is to consider the components or parts that make it up. At its simplest a *sign* consists of two components. First, there is a spoken, written, or visual symbol (such as a word, a road sign or an advertisement) – this is known as the *signifier*. Second, associated with this symbol will be a certain concept or idea – this is the *signified*. For example, the word 'cat' (the signifier) along with our understanding of what a cat is (a small furry domestic animal – this is the signified) together provides us with an understanding or meaning of a 'cat'. This then is the sign – the sum of both the word and the meaning we attach to it.

One of the key suggestions of de Saussure is that the relationship between a sign and its meaning is *arbitrary*. That is to say, that meaning is not straightforward. For example there is no reason why the three letters that make up the word 'cat' should mean a small furry domestic animal. These three letters could just as easily have been used to refer to what we call a 'dog' or a 'fish' or a 'banana'.

De Saussure's most influential ideas were set out in lectures given between 1907 and 1911 and published posthumously in 1916 as *Cours de Linguistique General*, edited

from de Saussure's papers and his students' notes. De Saussure emphasised that what a sign stands for is simply a matter of cultural convention, of how things are done in a given culture. This can clearly be seen in the way different people attach different meanings to a word or the way people use different words to refer to the same object/thing. For instance, the word 'pig' could refer to a farmyard animal. However, in a different context, or to a different person, a 'pig' could refer to a greedy person or even a police officer. Likewise to a French speaking person the farmyard animal in question is not called a 'pig' at all, but rather a 'porc'. This is also the case for all signs and symbols. For instance, many Western cultures see black as a colour for mourning and funerals; however, in many Asian nations it is white (and not black) that is associated with death (Newsom, 2007).

If the sign is arbitrary, then its meaning can only be established by considering its relation to other signs. It is thus necessary to look for the connections and differences between signs. These are classified in two broad ways:

- Syntagmatically – the linear or sequential relations between signs (thus traditional English meals consist of a starter, followed by a main course and a dessert).
- Paradigmatically – the 'vertical' relations, the particular combination of signs (thus soup or melon but not apple pie for starters).

Semiologists also speak of different levels of signification. The skilled semiologist can proceed from the level of denotation, the obvious

meaning of the sign (e.g. a photograph of a cowboy smoking a Marlboro cigarette), to the connotation of the sign, its taken-for-granted meaning (e.g. that smoking Marlboro is something that tough 'real' men do.)

In this way the ideological functions of signs can be exposed. Certain cultural forms can be seen as myths which serve to render specific (often bourgeois) values as natural, universal and eternal.

A further influential distinction suggested by de Saussure is between language as a patterned system (*langue*) and language as embodied in actual speech (*parole*) – and in particular, de Saussure himself concentrated most of his studies on language systems (*langue*), which are relatively stable, unlike spoken language (*parole*) that are much more fluid and dynamic. This is because de Saussure located the study of language as part of a larger science devoted to 'the study of the life of signs within society'. In particular, semiologists maintain that it is possible to discern certain logics or structures or codes, which underpin the multiplicity of cultural life as we experience it – and in particular semiology is associated with **structuralism** (p. 17).

De Saussure's ideas have been developed effectively in the broader sphere of culture by **Roland Barthes** (p. 96). His writings explicate the latent meanings (the myths and codes) that inform such diverse cultural phenomena as guide books, steak and chips, electoral photography, all-in wrestling, margarine, and the Eiffel Tower. A good example of Barthes use of semiology is his analysis of a cover photograph on the French magazine, *Paris Match* (p. 31).

Defining concept 2.1 (continued)

Further reading

Barthes, R. (1973) *Mythologies*, St Albans: Paladin.

Gottdeiner, M. (1995) *Postmodern Semiotics*, Oxford: Blackwell.

message or information. This model therefore presents a very straightforward and simplistic understanding of communication, which at its simplest involves a three-stage process of 'sender – message – receiver'. First, there is an individual (the sender) who composes a message (such as a letter or a spoken sentence or phrase), this is then delivered to and received by another individual (the receiver).

What this model fails to recognise or consider, is the social context of message creation, conveyance and reception. For instance, the process of communication does not simply involve a message, which is clearly intended by the sender and likewise clearly understood in the same way by the receiver. The meaning of a message will be determined by many different social factors, such as the contexts of the message, the form it takes, the power relations between the 'sender' and 'receiver' and the process of interpretation and re-interpretation undertaken by the receiver. All of these (and more) are what helps create the meaning of a message and also form important constituent parts of the communication process, and cannot therefore be simply dismissed as 'noise' that needs to be overcome. In particular, **semiotics** (or semiology as it is also known), which is the study (or science) of 'signs', shows us that 'meaning' is not straightforward or 'natural'; but rather that there is an arbitrary relationship between a signifier (word, symbol or similar) and the meaning that this carries (the signified).

Therefore, there is no natural commonsensical reason why we attach certain meaning to words or symbols. Furthermore, de Saussure suggests that the semiotic systems (such as language) we use are not made *by* 'the world', but rather it is semiotic systems that *make* the world (Schirato and Yell, 2000). That is to

say, it is not simply the existence of pigs or cats that makes us form words to describe these, but rather the words and signs we develop, and the meaning we attach to these, that shape our understanding of the world.

This can be clearly illustrated by Benjamin Lee Whorf's work on the language system of the Hopi, a Native American people. Unlike mainstream American culture which expresses the understanding of time in spatial metaphors, for example, one may say 'it is a *long time* since ...' or 'it will happen in a *short time*', the Hopi expressed events as happenings taking place in a state of *being*, a condition that does not lend itself to being categorised in the same way as mainstream American notions of time. Similarly the tenses of the Hopi language did not correspond with American customary notions of past, present and future.

Whorf's work is built upon the earlier work on linguistics of Edward Sapir who suggested that there develops in all languages specialised and elaborated lexicons dedicated to the description and understanding of important features of social and cultural life. Whorf's work on the Hopi, together with Sapir's earlier analysis, contributed to the formulation of the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis that states that language creates mental categories through which humans make sense of the world. The proposition is that the world is filtered through the conceptual grids produced by language and the routine and regular use of particular languages produces habitual thought patterns, which are culturally specific. It is these culturally specific thought patterns that Sapir and Whorf refer to as *thought worlds*. Whorf expresses the idea in the following way:

We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages. The categories and types that we

Box 2.1

Semiotics of colonialism



Figure 2.1 Cover of *Paris Match*.

One of the best-known examples of semiotic analysis can be found in Roland Barthes' (1915–80) analysis of a photograph from the magazine *Paris Match* (1976). This photograph was published at the time when France was embroiled in the conflict over the decolonisation of Algeria. As will be seen, this context of conflict over empire is very significant to the meaning and analysis of the photograph. Barthes says: 'I am at the barber's, and a copy of *Paris-Match* is offered to me' (1976: 116). He continues, 'On the cover, a young Negro in a French uniform is saluting, with his eyes uplifted, probably fixed on the fold of the tricolour. All this is the

meaning of the picture.' Barthes has identified the denotative meaning of the photograph. Having done this, Barthes develops his analysis. He says:

But, whether naively or not, I see very well what it signifies to me: that France is a great Empire, that all her sons, without any colour discrimination, faithfully serve under her flag, and that there is no better answer to the detractors of an alleged colonialism than the zeal shown by this Negro in serving his so-called oppressors.

(1976: 116)

After identifying these connotations of the photograph, Barthes locates his discussion within the language of semiotics:

I am therefore again faced with a greater semiological system: there is a signifier, itself already formed within a previous system (a black soldier is giving the French salute); there is a signified (it is here a purposeful mixture of Frenchness and militariness); and finally a presence of the signified through the signifier.

The discussion of these photographs has introduced several important points about semiotics which can be summarised as follows:

- 1 Any image or text can be said to contain different layers or levels of meaning. In particular there is a distinction between *denotative* and *connotative* levels.
- 2 The nature of such meanings will depend on the context in which they are contained, or the surrounding circumstances. Meaning is *relational*.
- 3 Some of the levels of meaning or *codes* are relatively neutral, or objective, whereas others will be saturated with social meanings or discourses.
- 4 The recognition and elucidation of these different meanings involves analysis or *decoding* which often depends on the nature of the knowledge and experience brought to the analysis.

Using the language of semiotics, the photographs considered here are acting as signs. The sign consists of two elements: the signifier and the signified. The signifier is a sound,

Box 2.1 (continued)

printed word or image, and the signified is a mental concept. The semiotic approach, which was developed from the study of language by de Saussure, has been applied widely. Thus, **Barthes** (p. 96) argues (1976: 113):

take a black pebble: I can make it signify in several ways, it is a

mere signifier; but if I weigh it with a definite signified (a death sentence, for instance, in an anonymous vote), it will become a sign.

Barthes shows how different levels of meaning are associated. This is shown in Figure 2.2.

This demonstrates the relationship

between the denotative or connotative levels of meaning. Barthes also writes here about the distinction between language and myth. For Barthes, myths shore up existing structures of power, which favour the bourgeois class. Myths make what is historical or changeable appear to be natural and static and are thus ideological. Thus, the myth constructed in part by the photograph of the young black man in uniform would seek to represent the Algerian conflict in such a way as to prevent change and decolonialisation.

Further reading

Barthes, R. (1973) *Mythologies*, St Albans: Paladin.

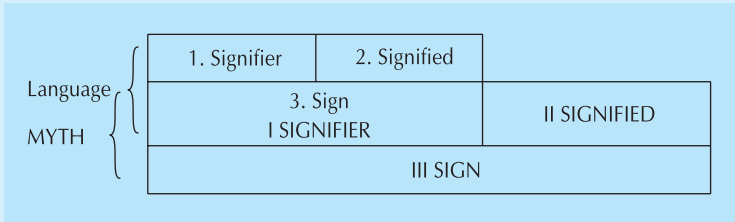


Figure 2.2 Language and myth. (Source: Barthes, 1976.)

isolate from the world of phenomena we do not find there because they stare every observer in the face; on the contrary, the world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organized by our minds and this means largely by the linguistic systems in our minds. We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way – an agreement that holds through our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language. The agreement is, of course, an implicit and unstated one. *But its terms are absolutely obligatory*; we cannot talk at all except by subscribing to the organization and classification of data which the agreement decrees.

(Carroll, 1956: 212–14, in Black, 1972: 97)

Therefore, for linguistic theories, such as semiotics and the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis, language is seen as a structural system, which is both stable and provides a

useful tool for understanding the social world in which these are used. Therefore linguists such as Saussure provides the basis of **structuralism** (p. 17) – the idea that there are structures to be found below or behind everyday interaction.

Structuralism and the order of meaning

Structuralists see culture as an ordered system or structure. Culture is presented as a system of coded meanings that are produced and reproduced through social interaction. Their interest is in how participants through interaction learn and use the codes of communication. A number of perspectives have been brought to this issue.

Certain theories of linguistics, for example those of Ferdinand de Saussure and Noam Chomsky, state that there is a universal structuring principle in all human language: that of binary oppositions. Binary opposi-

tions consist of two opposing terms; for example, black and white, man and woman, high and low. Lévi-Strauss (1966) argues that these oppositions are not amenable to direct observation or analysis. Instead, they operate at a level that is not conscious, a level sometimes described as that of deep structure. The study of culture, according to structuralists, consists of an examination of cultural forms. These cultural forms are the result of the human mind being brought to bear on particular environments. Lévi-Strauss argues that the resultant cultural forms all exhibit the same pattern, that of binary oppositions. The content of particular cultures may be different but this is the result of different environments. What is significant is not the different contents, but the identical patterning of cultural forms. Working from the assumption that cultural forms consist of identical patterns, Lévi-Strauss says that individuals have an innate biological capacity, what he calls a 'bio-grammar', which they use to 'decode' or interpret codes of cultural information. Codes are cultural in the sense that they are the expression of a people's shared conventions at a particular time. Acculturated members of a society know the codes for their society. Codes are culturally specific, but the ability to decode is universal and innate.

This means that everyone makes sense of the world at two distinct levels, which take place simultaneously. The first is at the level of deep structure where the binary oppositions operate. The second is at the surface level of contemporaneous activity where knowledge of a cultural code allows sorting and classifying to operate and meaning to emerge. Lévi-Strauss likens this thinking to what we engage in when we listen to music. We hear both the melody and the harmony, but in order to achieve an understanding of the music we have to integrate them. It is the whole that gives us the message, and so it is both surface and deep structure that gives us our understanding of cultural messages. Lévi-Strauss worked out these ideas through the analysis of myth, which he argues is one of the clearest forms of cultural expression of a society's view of itself.

Mary Douglas (1966) and Edmund Leach (1970) adopt a similar stance to that of Lévi-Strauss towards cultural understanding and the reception of cultural messages. They both agree that meaning arises out of patterning and order, but they differ from Lévi-Strauss

in locating the source of order in the social world and not in physiology. It is the social and cultural contexts and the agreed meanings of shared experience through interaction that allocate and set meanings. Leach, for example, illustrates his case with colour classifications. In English culture there are customary associations made between colours and fact and feeling – thus red is the colour of danger, red is also associated with pomp, it is the colour of the British Labour Party and it is a term used to describe members of the Communist Party. A native user of English is aware of some if not all of the repertoire of available meanings and on hearing the word 'red' will decide, according to context, which meaning is appropriate. This will be the meaning that makes sense to the hearer and gives a message. This sociocultural explanation of culture and communication also pays attention to other features of conventional cultural systems, such as gesture, dress, physical appearance, volume and tone of communication. The standardised meanings that cluster around each cultural item provide support and evidence for situationally preferred readings.

Hermeneutics and interpretation

Another significant tradition in the social sciences concerned with meaning and interpretation is hermeneutics. Derived initially from debates in German-speaking countries over the interpretation of the Bible, this approach has become increasingly concerned with wider issues of interpretation and with philosophical debates over the connections between meaning and existence. Hermeneutics argues that it is impossible to divorce the meaning of a text from the cultural context of its interpreter. In order to interpret any text the interpreter necessarily and unavoidably brings to the text certain prior understandings or fore-understandings from their own culture. The interpreter's fore-understandings facilitate the process of interpretation and are themselves worked upon (i.e. confirmed, modified, refuted, amended, etc.) in the course of interpretation. This conversation-like process is sometimes described by the term 'the hermeneutic circle' (Gadamer, 1975: 235–45). Advocates of the hermeneutic circle maintain that

interpretation is not a simple one-way transmission of ideas from text to reader but it is rather an interactive process in which the reader's fore-understandings are required for any further understanding of the text to be possible. Thus, when we read Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1600–1), or watch a performance of it, we bring to bear our present-day cultural understandings about familial relations, jealousy and revenge, sexual propriety, etc., and these understandings are elaborated and modified in consequence of our reading of this play. The notion of the hermeneutic circle has fed into many theories of culture in the social sciences and humanities. One of its central implications is to underscore the absence of any privileged or objective position for the interpretation of cultural phenomena – knowledge of a culture, to paraphrase the American sociologist Harold Garfinkel, is always knowledge 'from within' a culture.

One example of the development of a sociological approach to interpretation influenced by the hermeneutic tradition can be found in the work of the Hungarian sociologist of knowledge Karl Mannheim. Mannheim argues that a cultural act or text contains three levels of meaning: objective, expressive and documentary. Mannheim uses the hypothetical example of a friend giving alms to a beggar to bring out the differences between these three layers of meaning. The first level is the objective meaning of the act or product inheres in the act itself, and in this example it is assistance. The second level, expressive meaning, involves the consideration of what an actor intended or wishes to express by any particular act. Mannheim's friend may have been wishing to convey sympathy to the beggar through his act. The third layer of meaning is the most important for Mannheim as it links the act to wider contexts. The act can function as a document of the friend's personality and could be seen to document hypocrisy if, for example, the friend was a multi-millionaire who made his money by making the beggar redundant from a job in the first place. However, to formulate this interpretation we have to know the wider context of the act, for example, that its author was exceptionally wealthy. This connection to wider contexts establishes, in this case, links between the act and the political economy within which it takes place. In the next section we discuss political economy and the

importance of **ideology** (p. 35) as a way of understanding patterns of meaning.

The importance of social context in determining meaning is also illustrated by several other sociologists, including, most notably the work of **Erving Goffman** and **Pierre Bourdieu** (see below). Goffman (1974) highlights how our social experiences are interpreted and understood through 'frames' of reference. Frames are basically cognitive tools that we subconsciously construct to help us make sense of a social situation. For instance, if we see an individual standing on a street corner playing a guitar, with an open guitar case in front of them full of money, we apply our existing frame to this to make sense of this. This allows us to understand that the individual is 'busking' and therefore (if we feel so inclined) we could put money in their case, rather than that this person is giving away free money, and we should reach down and take some. However, as with the hermeneutic circle, these frames are formed on the basis of interaction, and hence have both structure and flexibility.

Goffman also discusses at length the use of frame narratives. Narratives refer to the structured meanings within a story, which have a sense of sequence and causality. For instance, take our busker. By playing a guitar on the street corner, they want (and often get) people to place money in their guitar case. This then tells a structured mini-story (a narrative) where events progress and cause others to occur. Though not considered by Goffman, it is also important to recognise that narratives are also strongly influenced by **ideologies** (p. 35). For instance, narratives will have an 'expected' sequence of events based upon commonsensical ideas of what 'should' happen. For instance, most romance novels or film narratives prescribe to a heterosexual ideology, where the viewer expects the story to follow an expected 'boy-meets-girl' story and structure (Schirato and Yell, 2000).

The nature of narratives is also shaped by genre. Genres are types or forms of communication practice (Schirato and Yell, 2000). For instance, a face-to-face argument between two people, or a romance novel, or a newspaper article on poverty – these different genres all have different types (and expected) narrative structures and frames.

Pierre Bourdieu (1984) also contributes to our

understanding of social interactions and the meanings of communication through his discussion of 'fields' and 'habitus'. Fields for Bourdieu are the constituent parts of a society or 'social space' – and some examples discussed by Bourdieu include the contemporary fields of art, politics, sport and economics. Society, for Bourdieu, consists of multiple interrelated fields, where each of these will have its own habitus.

Habitus is similar to what other authors have described as the 'culture' of a particular group or society. However, key to Bourdieu's understanding of habitus is that this is embodied. Jenkins (1992: 74) writes that *habitus* is Latin to mean 'a habitual or typical condition, state or appearance, particularly of the body'. Bourdieu maintains much of the original meaning of this word, and particular emphasis is placed upon the embodiment of habitus. This Jenkins (1992: 74) argues is manifested in three ways: First, habitus only exists 'inside the heads of actors' – for instance, ways of behaving and modes of practice are learnt and internalised by social actors. Second, habitus only exists through the practice and actions of social actors – their ways of talking, moving, acting and behaviour. Third, the 'practical taxonomies' actors use to make sense of the world are all rooted in the body – such as male/female, hot/cold, up/down are all linked to our senses and physically located in relationship to our bodies.

This Bourdieu links to the term 'hexis', which refers to individuals' deportment, their stance, grace and gestures. Though habitus is located within the body it is

not a form of innate human behaviour but rather a way of behaving and understanding the world that is taught to us through social interaction. Unlike theories of socialisation, for Bourdieu habitus is achieved primarily through instruction, rather than experience.

For instance, in respect to art, the 'sophisticated' observer has been taught the mechanisms and language for decoding the symbolic meaning of the art form through their social network, education and interaction with others. This therefore, is crucial in our understanding of why certain social groups (such as social classes) possess the skills to 'understand' and interpret art, and others do not. However, it is also important to recognise that habitus is not a set inflexible frame, which people simply learn and remains static throughout their lives. As Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992: 133) suggest in relation to the concept of habitus:

Habitus is not the fate that some people read into it. Being the product of history, it is an open system of dispositions that is constantly subjected to experiences, and therefore constantly affected by them in a way that either reinforces or modifies its structure.

Hence, for both Bourdieu and Goffman meanings are shaped by existing frames of reference that social actors possess. However, these frames do not simply 'appear' ready-formed within individual heads, but rather it is important to recognise the role of **ideology** (see below) and the political economy in shaping these.

Defining concept 2.2

Ideology

Theories of ideology are an attempt to understand ideas in terms of **power** (p. 64). This has been most fully developed within **Marxist** (p. 65) theory (see Williams, 1977) and what follows is a consideration of that tradition and critiques of it. **Raymond Williams** (p. 3) (1977) stresses the various meanings that the term 'ideology' can have from explicitly acknowledged political ideologies to

more subconscious 'common-sensical meanings' or 'taken-for-granted beliefs'. He identifies two components to Marxist understandings of ideology:

- Ideology as the ideas of a particular social group.
- Ideology as a system of illusory beliefs.

Ideologies as the ideas of a social group

This is the argument that social groups (and within Marxism the debate has revolved mainly around social classes) have particular beliefs associated with them. One source of this is **Karl Marx** (p. 66) and Friedrich Engels's *The German Ideology*. In this critique of idealism (a way of thinking

Defining concept 2.2 (continued)

that identifies ideas as the main properties of a society) they asserted that ideas were not independent. Instead ideologies come from social classes in their social relations with each other. Or, as Janet Wolff says, 'the ideas and beliefs people have are systematically related to their actual and material conditions of existence' (Wolff, 1981: 50).

Ideas, or ideologies, are seen to be rooted in the material conditions of the everyday life of classes (including their relations with other classes). Yet these classes are not equal; some ideas dominate because of the unequal material social relations of a class-based society. Marx sums this up in a famous phrase: 'The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling *material* force of society, is at the same time its ruling *intellectual* force' (Marx and Engels, 1968: 64). Indeed, these ideas are part of their rule. They serve to legitimate their domination (for example, the Swedish ruling classes legitimating capitalist modernisation with ideologies of both progress and tradition – see p. 112) and to reproduce the unequal social relations from which they benefit (there are a whole series of arguments about how education is part of the reproduction of class relations, for example, Althusser, 1971; and Willis, 1977).

Generally, then, ideology (the realm of ideas) is seen to be shaped by something 'deeper' – the social (or class) relations within which people live their lives or even the economic organisation of society (or 'mode of production') which shapes those class relations. There is, however, a recognition that ideologies have real consequences. They operate as 'maps of meaning', used to interpret and define what is going on. That they

work better for some groups than others is the second component of Marxist theories that Williams identifies.

Ideology as a system of illusory beliefs

This is the suggestion that, because of their origins as part of unequal social relations, ideologies are a distorted representation of the truth. This relies on the points set out above to argue that there are sets of ideas appropriate to each class, generated by their position within exploitative social relations, but that people may have adopted other ideas via education, the media, entertainment and so on. Since a true class consciousness with an objective material basis is being claimed here, then people who do not think that way are said to have 'false consciousness'. There is a sense that they have been hoodwinked. Their real interests are concealed from them and the real interests of the exploitative classes are also concealed (for example, nationalism which serves the political, military and economic interests of ruling classes might be said to be false consciousness for a working class that 'should' think of itself not as divided but as internationally united).

There are a series of problems with these ways of thinking. First, 'false consciousness' is always something that someone else has, not oneself. It has a tendency to define people as 'cultural dupes' who can be led out of their ignorance by a right-thinking vanguard or the visionary theorist who knows the 'Truth'. Second, can classes and ideas be matched as neatly as this way of thinking suggests? Can we allocate ideologies to social groups in this way? Third, can the world be understood in terms of

class alone? If not, do the forms of analysis (often rooted in understanding economic relationships) set out above work for social groups defined in terms of gender, race, sexuality or age?

In response to these problems the 1970s and 1980s saw the development of more and more elaborate and difficult theoretical work on the relationships between ideas and power (see Althusser, 1971; Thompson, 1984). The main path that this took was through understanding language, thinking about ideas not as something 'free-floating' but as existing as words spoken or written. It also meant a move away from only studying class.

This work has stressed that ideology is about the relationship between language and power. Instead of thinking about ideas being fixed to particular social groups or about them being untrue there is a sense that meanings are not fixed, that they arise in language, in communication and representation. This means thinking about many competing ideologies, not one dominant one, and about a whole range of social groups. The connection to power lies in the ways in which meanings present the world to the advantage or disadvantage of particular social groups, and the ways in which those groups can attempt to fix or challenge those meanings. For example, a set of widespread ideas about nature, motherhood and domesticity which served to legitimate women's dependence within the home benefited and were reproduced by men, but have in many ways been effectively challenged by women. As Thompson says: 'To study ideology, I propose, is to study the ways in which meaning (or signification) serves to

Defining concept 2.2 (continued)

sustain relations of domination' (Thompson, 1984: 4).

This way of thinking is very close to other theoretical concepts that look at the relations between meaning and power (for example, **discourse** – p. 21) and has raised the question of whether we still need the concept of ideology. Those arguing against using it suggest that it still brings with it

the problems of believing in something called 'the truth', and of being too rooted in economic class relations (Foucault, 1980). Those who want to retain it claim that it brings a necessary critical edge to making judgements about the power relations involved in statements (Eagleton, 1991; Purvis and Hunt, 1993).

Further reading

Eagleton, T. (1991) *Ideology: An Introduction*, London: Verso.

Thompson, J. (1984) *Studies in the Theory of Ideology*, Cambridge: Polity.

Williams, R. (1977) *Marxism and Literature*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Political economy, ideology and meaning

An interest in political economy means an interest in issues of power and inequality that are associated with the allocation of resources and the formation of wealth. The ideas of political economy have had a widespread value and application in social science and in disciplines such as history and English studies because they have proved fruitful in the investigation of patterns of meaning. To relate political economy to culture is to prompt some of the following questions. What are the connections between ownership and control of the media and cultural transmission? What is the role of the economic infrastructure in the dissemination of ideas? What are the links between technology transfer and the transfer of knowledge? In all these areas of investigation a relationship is sought between politics, economics and culture.

An example of this approach would be an analysis of newspaper content to see if a connection can be established between the ownership and control of the newspaper and the type and nature of news printed. In simple terms, it suggests considering the extent to which the owner's views and interests are reflected in the content of the newspaper. Newspaper coverage of the news has been found to be overwhelmingly pro-capitalist, pro-*status quo* in character. The question then becomes: how is this coincidence with owner's interests to be explained? One explanation points to the concentration of ownership and control of British

newspapers (for instance, the Australian businessman Rupert Murdoch owns and controls *The Sun*, *News of the World* and *The Times* newspapers in the UK). Newspaper proprietors have mutual interests in other financial and industrial undertakings (for instance, Murdoch also owns numerous other businesses and media networks the world over, including *BSkyB* television and the *Fox* network), and also have an upbringing and lifestyle in common; in short, they have shared economic interests and a shared culture. Thus it is hardly surprising that the press's coverage is biased in favour of the interests and values of private enterprise.

An alternative explanation draws attention to some different features of the political economy of newspaper production. Here emphasis is placed on the prevailing logic of the market in which newspapers are presently produced. The commercial survival of newspapers depends upon advertising revenue which in turn generates a pressure to maintain a newspaper's circulation. To retain a large readership, newspapers give people what they are believed to want – human interest stories, crime, sex, sport and scandal. Entertaining the readership comes to take precedence over providing information about significant world events and educating the public in the ways of responsible citizenship. Material documenting cultural difference and ideological diversity tends to get squeezed out of newspapers, leaving only a relatively narrow middle ground.

A more sophisticated way of connecting the concerns of political economy and questions of cultural

meaning are through the concept of **ideology** (p. 35). Ideologies can be of various sorts. **Antonio Gramsci** (see below) divided up ideologies into three categories. The first is that of common sense. Common-sense ideas are those we all take for granted. Common-sense ideas and values are part of everyday life. They form the bedrock of our understanding of the world; but when examined closely they may appear to be either contradictory or very superficial. An example of a common-sense ideology is given in the phrase 'Boys are better at football than girls'. This expresses a widely held idea, commonly held to be true. A closer examination of this 'truth', however, might question its validity by asking 'Are boys encouraged to be more physically

active than girls?' or 'Are girls allowed to participate in football or are they excluded at home, at school, or at club level?' If the answer to these questions is yes, then the common-sense idea that boys are better at football than girls is shown to be true only because of particular circumstances.

Gramsci's second category of ideology is that of a particular philosophy. This means not so much the thought of a particular philosopher but of a particular group of people in society who put forward a reasonably coherent set of ideas. These people Gramsci calls intellectuals; and he includes both traditional intellectuals such as priests, and intellectuals who emerge from social movements, like trade unionists or political

Key influence 2.1



Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937)

Antonio Gramsci was an Italian political activist and writer who was influential in the development of **Marxist** (p. 65) cultural theory. He aimed to develop concepts that would enable the understanding and transformation of twentieth-century political and economic structures and social and cultural relations. He is best known for his work on the idea of **hegemony** (p. 73).

Gramsci was born in Sardinia and was educated in Turin where he joined the Italian Socialist Party, and worked as a journalist. In 1921 he was a founder member of the Italian Communist Party (PCI) and, after a visit to Moscow, was elected to the Italian Parliament. He later became leader of the PCI and, in 1926, was sentenced to 20 years' imprisonment by Mussolini's Fascist government. At his trial the official prosecutor demanded of the judge that 'We must stop this brain working for 20 years!' However, during his imprisonment Gramsci wrote his most famous works, published as *Selections from*

Prison Notebooks (1971), which combined studies of politics, philosophy, history, literature and culture. He died shortly after being released from prison.

Gramsci is important to cultural studies because of his attempts to develop the connections between class relations, culture and **power** (p. 64) without reducing issues of culture and meaning to a superstructure determined by an 'economic base'. His concept of hegemony aimed at understanding how dominant classes could organise their rule through consent when their political and economic power was not in the interest of those they subordinated. However, this was not a static situation within which the ideas of the powerful went unchallenged. Gramsci used the metaphor of a 'war of manoeuvre' to suggest that political struggles were continually being fought in a whole variety of arenas: political, economic and cultural. In turn this meant conceptualising the role of the intellectuals who were part

of fighting these 'wars'. Through his notion of the 'organic intellectual' he argued that everyone who used ideas was an intellectual (it was not just a label for a small professional group) and that these 'thinkers' and their ideas were organically tied to particular class interests. It can be argued that it is Gramsci's ideas that form the basis of the notion of 'cultural politics', due to the ways in which they were taken up and reworked by those working in the Birmingham **Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies** (p. 241) in the 1970s.

Further reading

Gramsci, A. (1971) *Selections from Prison Notebooks*, London: Lawrence and Wishart.

Gramsci, A. (1985) *Selections from Cultural Writings*, London: Lawrence and Wishart.

Joll, J. (1977) *Gramsci*, London: Fontana.

activists. Thus, examples of ideologies that are philosophies are Roman Catholic teachings or the ecological ideas of Greenpeace or the beliefs of Right to Life anti-abortionist groups. Gramsci's third category is that of a dominant or **hegemonic** (p. 73) ideology, that is one that has a leading role in society. An example of a hegemonic ideology in a particular society might be the dominance of one person's ideas, for example in a dictatorship. Or it might be the description of a society as capitalist or individualistic, whereby ideas (or ideologies) like 'the primacy of monetary profit' or 'the survival of the fittest' are the dominant ideas.

An understanding of how these three different categories of ideology may interrelate can be gained by thinking about the ideology of racism. In the first category, 'common-sense' racism might consist of phrases like 'The English are cold', or 'Black people are natural athletes'. These phrases express everyday prejudices as common sense. They do not, on their own, express anything more than the individual prejudice of the speaker. If, however, these common-sense ideas become part of a coherent system, then they enter Gramsci's second category of a philosophy. Nineteenth-century anthropologists classified the 'races' of humanity, placing Europeans at the top of a purportedly evolutionary ladder with Orientals and Africans coming further down; this is plainly an example of a racist philosophy. The Nazi and Fascist beliefs about Aryan racial superiority are of the same type. Racism becomes a dominant or hegemonic ideology when it is used within a particular society to legitimate the social divisions and organisation of that society. So, for example, the use of racist ideas to justify the European colonisation of India and Africa or to exclude black people from housing or particular jobs is an example of a hegemonic ideology. In practice, these three categories are often combined. Thus, a common-sense racist remark is often made in the context of an accepted knowledge of available racist philosophies and of racism as a hegemonic ideology – and the relationship between power and language is considered in more detail later in the chapter (p. 44).

Poststructuralism and the patterns of meaning

Thinking through the concept of ideology means considering a whole range of social groups and their relationship to ideas and cultural meanings. In the structuralist version these meanings are strictly patterned according to specific structures and systems such as binary opposition. In the political economy view there are more or less strong links between the different groups and the ideas and meanings that they hold. Poststructuralism has questioned the nature of the connections that are made in both of these other theoretical approaches.

First, it questions what are seen as the rigidities of structuralist systems of thought. Instead of binary oppositions it suggests that there are much more complicated and ever-changing systems of meaning that need to be understood in their particular contexts. Thus, the meanings that things have are not fixed – they are fluid and changing. As in our Shakespeare example, the meanings of the plays are not defined by fixed systems of signs – for example, thinking about the relationships between harmony and disharmony or order and disorder in the comedies – but are dependent on the contexts in which they are written, enacted, consumed and interpreted. Thus Shakespeare's understandings of race and money (such as in a play like *The Merchant of Venice*) can be interpreted in terms of contemporary **discourses** (p. 21) of economics and morality. This need not be based upon direct knowledge that Shakespeare had, but a set of interlocking cultural codes. As Stephen Greenblatt argues, dealing with the correspondences between medical texts and Shakespeare's texts:

[T]he state of Shakespeare's knowledge of medical science is not the important issue here. The relation I wish to establish between medical and theatrical practice is not one of cause and effect or source and literary realization. We are dealing rather with a shared code, a set of interlocking tropes and similitudes that function not only as the objects but as the conditions of representation.

(Greenblatt, 1988: 86)

It is not, therefore, the systems and structures of meaning that are important but the ways in which

more diffuse patterns of meanings intersect in particular situations.

Second, poststructuralists question the solidity of the relationships that the political economy approach argues exist between economic relationships and cultural meanings. Instead of asserting that there are ideologies appropriate to classes, they argue that the relationships are both contingent and contextual. Again, classes, genders and races are, in part, formed through the ideas, ideologies and discourses that are used about them and that they use in their struggles; and these will differ depending on the time, the place, the nature of the struggle, and the history of that struggle. Thus the patterns of meaning cannot be traced back to underlying political and economic structures; they are related to them but in ways that are ever-changing and which must be explored and interpreted by the cultural analyst. Thus, Shakespeare does not always define Englishness for a certain class, but is taken up in that way in particular battles over education, status and **cultural capital** (p. 259). All of this puts much more of a burden on our own interpretations of culture.

A central element of poststructuralist thought is the idea that culture – in all its forms – is a ‘text’ which can be ‘read’. This theoretical move towards ‘textuality’ shifts the focus of the study of culture. What is studied is not so much cultural forms or representation as the text itself. Whereas before it has been assumed that it might be possible to gain knowledge by the study of cultural form, poststructuralist theorists (**Barthes** (p. 96), **Foucault** (p. 20) and Jacques Derrida) have questioned the search for meaning and coherence.

Semiology suggests that all cultural products should be seen as ‘texts’. However, unlike de Saussure and other structuralists would have us believe, the meaning of these texts is not set. For instance, for de Saussure meaning was seen as intentional. De Saussure saw signs as consisting of specific (and to some degree independent) components that were ‘put together’ by someone. Therefore, de Saussure prioritises the importance of the sender of a message, and the act of sending as a conscious decision. However, not all meanings are intended. Poststructuralism highlights how meanings are not always intended, and that texts are *polysemic* (open to multiple readings).

Jacques Derrida has argued that the texts that make up culture can never be pinned down. Instead of yielding meaning and knowledge to the student of culture, they defer it. The task of students of culture is not, therefore, to look for explanations, but to ‘deconstruct’ meaning in culture. Students of culture should not look for systems, structures and ideologies but should look at the gaps, discontinuities and inconsistencies in texts. Followers of this approach contend that there is always partiality and subjectivity in understanding; culture consists of multiple realities that are never understood in their entirety either by the sender or the receiver of information. Texts are always subject to interpretation, doubt and dispute, whatever the attempts of authors to exercise control. As Schirato and Yell write:

texts circulate widely within a variety of contexts and situation types. They last of a time and then disappear from circulation, perhaps to reappear later in a different form. Riddles, jokes, fashions, limericks, songs, advertising, slogans and jingles, memorable lines from movies, characteristic sayings of public figures, whole texts and fragment of texts of all kinds are used and re-used within cultures.

(Schirato and Yell, 2000: 52)

Though texts circulate, and may have a life beyond their original context, all texts carry with them elements of their previous context(s). This means that texts do not exist in isolation, but always refer or relate to other texts. Hence, it is argued by Bakhtin that all texts are simply a composite of ‘where they have been’ and other texts that they relate, so therefore no text can claim ‘originality’.

The ‘Bakhtin School’, and particularly V.N. Volosinov, argues that the sign (see **semiology** – p. 29) is a site of social contestation. This means that different groups within society struggle, argue and dispute over the meanings of different signs. Volosinov argues, that unlike de Saussure suggests there can never be perfect autonomous semiotic system, as semiotic systems are constantly in use, and therefore constantly being contested and therefore changing.

In *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (1973) Volosinov argues that it is class conflict that conditions the struggle over signs. Bakhtin’s idea that any text con-

tains ‘multiple voices’ within it has been developed by Julia Kristeva’s (p. 149) influential concept of ‘intertextuality’. This idea concerns the relation of a given text to other texts. Any text, it is argued, can be analysed in terms of the other texts that it has absorbed and transformed. Thus intertextuality embraces various forms of textual borrowing and echoing, such as allusion, parody, pastiche and quotation. The concept allows us to appreciate how a science fiction movie like *Blade Runner* draws on 1940s ‘hard-boiled’ detective stories and *film noir* as intertexts (*The Maltese Falcon*, *The Big Sleep*, etc.). What we see in *Blade Runner* is the incorporation and transformation of these intertexts in a futuristic setting (the movie is set in 2019). Most of the action takes place in shadowy rooms or after dark in poorly lit public places; the film’s hero makes a living out of a technologically advanced parody of the classic gumshoe role; the heroine dresses in 1940s retro style; like many *film noir* movies, the development of the plot is at times opaque and, also like many movies of this genre, in the original version of *Blade Runner* the hero provides ‘voice-over’ to link scenes. By deconstructing *Blade Runner* in terms of its intertexts it becomes possible to realise one poststructuralist premise, ‘the death of the author’. What this means is that the author’s intentions are adjudged irrelevant to the interpretations of the text; the text is a separate and autonomous entity. Thus, instead of studying the influences on the author and the sources s/he drew upon in authoring the text (a notoriously contentious interpretive strategy), the interpreter is left instead to consider the intertexts figuring in a given text.

Postmodernism and semiotics

The philosophic origins of **postmodern** (p. 295) thought can be traced back to the philosophy of Nietzsche and Heidegger. These philosophers, and in particular Nietzsche, question the ideas of the Enlightenment that there exists one ‘true’ reality, which is delivered to us by science and rationality. Nietzsche suggested that all social reality was a product of language and thought, and not objective truths or realities.

These ideas were then developed further by postmodern writers such as Jean-Francois Lyotard and Jean

Baudrillard (p. 299). Lyotard is often viewed as one of the ‘founding fathers’ of postmodern social theory. Like many postmodernists, Lyotard’s philosophical origins can be seen in his disillusionment with traditional **Marxist** (p. 65) theory. Lyotard rejects the idea that Marxism offers the only objective knowledge of society, and rejects the idea that society is based around technologies of production (as Marx would have us believe). Instead Lyotard suggests that social life revolves around language and **discourse** (p. 21). In particular, he highlights the changing nature of narrative in social life.

Lyotard suggests that in pre-industrial times, myths and stories had a religious quality and assisted in the reproduction of the social order. With the Enlightenment came a new set of narratives, which emphasised progress and reason, knowledge and technology. These provided social life with an order and regularity. However, he suggests we have now moved into a postmodern era, where science, technology and computers have developed to such a point that the principle force within our society has become knowledge. Knowledge becomes more widespread and accessible, hence, there is a decline in belief of one truth or one knowledge.

Lyotard refers to this as the decline in grand narratives or metanarratives. He suggests that knowledge has always been made up of different, and at times incompatible perspectives or views, but these were often hidden within modernism and scientific positivism, which claimed to provide one absolute truth. However, most people no longer believe that there is one truth that is delivered to us by science and rationality. Nor do they believe that there is one theory, which can explain all aspects of our social lives. As a result, knowledge and societies fragment. As Lyotard writes:

The social bond is linguistics, but it is not woven with a single thread ... nobody speaks all those languages, they have no universal metalanguage ... the goal of emancipation has nothing to do with science ...

(Lyotard, 1984: 40–41)

Hence, what defines our postmodern social lives is language and linguistic, but there exists no one true

meaning, no one true reality. There is no truth, but only truths.

Postmodern knowledge comes by 'putting into question existing paradigms, by inventing new ones, rather than assenting to universal truth or in agreeing to a consensus' (Best and Kellner, 1991: 166), and draws on the work of poststructuralist such as Derrida. Derrida (1978) suggest that the relationship between the signifier and the sign (see **semiology** – p. 29) is now *completely arbitrary* and lacks any connection at all. The signifier (the concept or idea) has no link to the real world or to an object (the signified), but exists on its own. Signs therefore become free floating, without any link or relationship to an underlying reality. All that exists is a concept, or 'image', without any basis or link to reality.

In particular, these are ideas developed further by Jean Baudrillard (p. 299). Baudrillard, following Derrida, also sees signs as becoming free-floating, disconnected from reality. In particular, Baudrillard suggests that society has become overrun by simulacra. This is an 'image' or representation of a person or thing, which lacks the substance or qualities of the original. Baudrillard argues that these *simulacra* 'are so omnipresent that it is henceforth impossible to distinguish the real from simulacra' (Best and Kellner, 1991: 101).

Baudrillard links this to ideas of *hyperreality*. Hyperreality is 'the blurring of distinctions between the real in the unreal and which the prefix 'hyper' signifies more real than real whereby the real is produced according to a model' (Best and Kellner, 1991: 119). For postmodernists there is no longer an underlying reality, which has an existence apart from the simulations and simulacra. The only reality is a reality created by signs (which have no depth or relation to real objects). What we consider to be social reality is indefinitely reproducible and extendable, with the copy indistinguishable from the original, or perhaps seeming more real than the original.

For instance, Baudrillard suggests that Disneyland is presented to America (and the rest of the world) as an 'unreal' fantasy land – but this conceals that fact that all of America *is* Disneyland, it is all a hyperreal theme park. However, Disneyland does not hide social reality, in the sense that Marx argues that social reality is

hidden from people, but rather Disneyland conceals that fact that there is nothing to conceal, nothing to hide, because America is a superficial hyperreal nation, where there is no depth. Everything appears on the surface (Inglis and Hughson, 2003).

Baudrillard also uses the term *implosion* to refer to the process whereby simulation and reality collapse in on each other and become the same, so that there is no longer any distinction between the two. This is:

A process of social entropy leading to a collapse of boundaries, including the implosion of meaning in the media and the implosion of media messages and the social in the masses. ... The dissemination of media messages and semiurgy saturates the social field, and meaning and messages flatten each other out in a neutralized flow of information, entertainment, advertising, and politics.

(Best and Kellner, 1991: 121).

All the different parts of the social world implode, leaving no separation between formerly distinctive parts of society – politics and sports become entertainment, or the latter become the former. For instance, with the O. J. Simpson or Michael Jackson trials it becomes difficult to separate entertainment, legal issues, private, public and the social reality – all imploded together and all that is left is a depthless spectacle. The public become mesmerised by the spectacular. Reality and meaning no longer matter or even exist – just the spectacle. Therefore for postmodernists (like Baudrillard) there is no social world, or individuals, just an all consuming mass wrapped up in the consumption of signs and spectacles.

2.2 Language, representation, power and inequality

Representation and communication of cultural meaning takes place through language because of two sets of standardisations: the customary meanings attached to words and the customary ways of speaking in given social and cultural settings. In both instances membership of the language community may be tested or decided according to the familiarity of a language

user with the conventions of use. Language is seen as *problematic*, and this approach owes much to the development of social and cultural theorising which stresses the partial and contested nature of social life; such theorising is often labelled as **postmodern** (p. 295) but it also characterises much feminist analysis, as well as race, ethnic and class analyses.

A key source for them is the work of the Russian Marxist analyst of language V.N. Volosinov (1973).

Volosinov argues that language has to be understood in social context and in social activity. It is this stress on social activity that is perhaps of central importance to subsequent developments. As **Raymond Williams** (p. 3) argues:

We then find not a reified 'language' and 'society' but an active *social language*. Nor (to glance back at positivist and orthodox materialist theory) is this language a simple 'reflection' or 'expression' of

Defining concept 2.3

Representation and realism

Raymond Williams (1983b: 296) points to two meanings of 'represent' that have developed through history. A representation, he suggests, can mean either 'a symbol or image, or the process of presenting to the eye or the mind'. The meaning of symbol or image is particularly important. A representation re-presents or stands for something else. As Williams explains, this meaning is complicated by the development of the idea of an 'accurate reproduction'. Hence, a photograph represents that which was arranged before the camera, but is also often thought to be an accurate reproduction of it. We are familiar with the common phrase 'the camera never lies'. However, we should also be aware that photographs may be cropped or doctored to produce a particular meaning.

Realism in art or culture seems to be simply captured in the idea that it attempts 'to show things as they really are' (Lovell, 1980). However, such simplicity is illusory and realism has been hotly debated. Berger (1972) points to the way in which realism in art develops at a particular historical moment. Likewise Watt (1963) illuminates the beginnings of the realist novel, which used real names for characters and was set in

recognisable places and so on. Some versions of realism attempt to capture the details of everyday life in all its aspects. This approach was labelled naturalism in the nineteenth century. The novels of Zola are held to be an important example. Other forms of realism have worked through the practice of typicality. It does not matter, it may be suggested, that all life is not shown (indeed, how could it be?) as long as recognisable types are used for characters and events. However, some **Marxist** (p. 65) approaches to realism often criticise these ideas, as they suggest that there is some deeper truth or reality to be known, which will not be captured by conventional realist depiction. Somewhat paradoxically, the attempt to capture this reality is often through avant-garde methods. Debates between the Marxist critics Lukács and Brecht pointed up some of these issues, as did the later work of MacCabe. The latter used a very wide definition of realism, which he then criticised as being unable to capture the real.

Despite the difficulties involved in defining realism, the term is much used in everyday discussions about fiction. Being authentic or real is often seen as praiseworthy and being

melodramatic a criticism. However, such simplifications evade the difficulties surrounding the terms. For example, soap operas are often criticised for their inadequate representation of the real: too much happens, they do not contain enough ethnic minorities, whole rich families share one house and so on. They are not empirically or objectively real. However, as Ang (1985) in her discussion of viewers' reactions to the American soap *Dallas* shows, these representations may convey ideas and feelings that viewers feel to be subjectively real or important. They may be emotionally realist. Criticising or praising realism is not to be done lightly without a clear definition of the meaning of the term.

Further reading

- Lovell, T. (1980) *Pictures of Reality: Aesthetics, Politics and Pleasure*, London: BFI.
- Hill, J. (1986) *Sex, Class and Realism: British Cinema 1956–1963*, London: BFI.
- Williams, R. (1983b) *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, London: Fontana.

‘material reality’. What we have, rather, is a grasping of this reality through language, which as practical consciousness is saturated by and saturates all social activity, including productive activity. And, since this grasping is social and continuous (as distinct from the abstract encounters of ‘man’ and ‘his world’, or ‘consciousness’ and ‘reality’, or ‘language’ and ‘material existence’), it occurs within an active and changing society.

(Williams, 1977: 37)

Williams took these ideas very seriously in his own work – so much so that he devoted extensive sections of many of his own books to the consideration of the history and development in social context of important concepts. The zenith of this work came in his book *Keywords* (Williams, 1983b), which appears to be a dictionary, but is actually an investigation of the contested meaning and social import of some terms and concepts that Williams takes to be central in contemporary social and political struggles. As Eagleton (1983: 117) argues, concerning Volosinov but which could equally be applied to Williams, ‘It was not simply a matter of asking “what the sign meant”, but of investigating its varied history, as conflicting social groups, classes, individuals and discourses sought to appropriate it and imbue it with their own meanings’.

Language and power

Cultural politics (see Chapter 6, p. 141) introduces the dimension of inequalities in **power** (p. 64) and authority in cultural forms and the *contested* nature of cultural practice; it is these concerns that drive the analysis of language when it is linked with the domains of class, race or gender. Thus, as will be suggested below, language has become increasingly politicised and implicated in social struggles. Consequently, argument has moved from seeing language as a neutral instrument for objectively representing and communicating the views of a uniform grouping to seeing language as a politically and culturally charged medium over which groups wrestle for control.

Benedict Anderson (1991) drew attention to the role of print languages in enabling the rise and spread of nationalism. At present, it is sufficient to single out that

thread of Anderson’s argument that says that the invention of print language gave a ‘new fixity’ to language and created languages of power; particular forms of language became dominant. Spoken languages that were close in form and vocabulary to printed language were the most prestigious (Anderson, 1991: 44–5). In this way written language came to be viewed as more ‘correct’ than spoken language and oral communication was, and often still is, evaluated socially according to its degree of resemblance to written language (Street, 1993; Leech *et al.*, 1982). In this process of evaluation, ways of speaking such as dialect (local language), accent, choice of words and use of grammar were all assessed and ranked against the social conventions of language as typified in written language (Street, 1993; Labov, 1973). These rankings were extended to other areas of social experience and, through the overlaying of social action by cultural ways of speaking, became a symbolic representation of ways of life – a situation summed up by Pulgram in the following way:

We can recognise a person by his speech quite apart from the intelligence or intelligibility of his utterance. The mere physical features of his speech, conditioned automatically and by habits, suffice for identification. If, in addition, what he says and how he says it, in other words his style, provide further clues all the better. The what and how are socially conditioned, however, by the speaker’s education, surroundings, profession, etc. Directors and actors of radio plays who cannot convey any part of the contents of the performance visually are very skilful in the art of voice characterisation. Even the psyche; the temperament of a person finds expression in his speech, to say nothing of his temporary moods and every hearer makes a certain value judgement of a speaker simply on the basis of ‘what he talks like’.

(Pulgram, 1954, in Street, 1993)

A cultural studies approach reminds us that what is being described is not simply **difference** (p. 121) but hierarchies of prestige which are often also hierarchies of **power** (p. 64). Street (1993) alerts us to the resonances of words: he argues that the use of the word ‘one’ as in ‘one knows’ implies status; the use of the word ‘we’ can express solidarity but when used by a

doctor, as in ‘and how are we feeling today?’, it can imply power and status (Street, 1993: 71).

The specialised lexicons and forms of speech that characterise certain social groupings serve to facilitate communication among those who belong to the group but exclude those who are outside and cannot speak the language. It is debatable whether specialised lexicons (semantic domains) can be ranked in terms of functional use – some being more useful than others; but what is certain is that it is possible to rank the social groupings who use particular semantic domains, so, for example, the professional language of doctors and lawyers is more prestigious than that of youth groups (see below). Language as a communicative form which represents, constructs and reproduces social and cultural inequality is the focus of the next sections.

Language and class

The work of the sociologist Basil Bernstein (1924–2000) is an influential example of research linking social class, language and speech. Educational policies and practices in Britain and the USA in the 1960s were much affected in their design and implementation by his explanations of the educational failure of young people. In essence, Bernstein argued that his researches showed that lower-class members of English society spoke a language that was *restricted* in comparison with the *elaborated* code of the middle classes. This restricted code handicapped them in their quest for social and economic betterment because schools, which were seen by Bernstein as the chief agency for social mobility, required the use of elaborated codes. Elaborated codes were necessary for the intellectual activity of learning and for the social and political purposes of receiving favourable recognition from teachers. See Box 2.2.

Bernstein revised the characteristics of restricted and elaborated codes a number of times in the light of empirical and theoretical work and eventually abandoned them. It is important to note that the changing configurations reveal the difficulties of identifying a set of inherent characteristics of cultural forms, especially when, as in this case, they are linked in opposition to each other.

Bernstein’s depiction of the relationship between language and class is reminiscent of the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis; indeed it is possible to recast Bernstein’s analysis in terms of lower- and middle-class groups occupying different ‘thought worlds’. Both hypotheses give weight to the effects of socialisation in establishing taken-for-granted ways of seeing the world that form the texture of thought for group members. And in both cases ways of thinking are a response to socioeconomic environments. Bernstein’s work is distinctive in that it is looking at language use within an apparently homogeneous language group, whereas Sapir’s and Whorf’s studies relate to quite different and distinct language groups; the most startling difference for our purposes is Bernstein’s linking of speech and language with the structured inequalities of the English class system. For Bernstein, class-based language is not simple variation but reflects the hierarchies of the English class system with the consequence that some languages are socially and culturally dominant. Success comes to those who speak the dominant language and use its skills. Bernstein argues that formal or elaborated language is better than public or restricted language because it is constituted through the operation of logic and abstract thought – qualities that are functionally necessary for learning. Lower-class language is more context bound and encourages the assertion of uniformity, not the appreciation of difference. In this sense lower-class language is a less competent form than middle-class language and its speakers and users are not able to benefit from education which requires discrimination and logic. Bernstein’s analysis suggests that the class base of English society is perpetuated and made visible through language; language both **represents** (p. 43) and *constitutes* the class system.

New emphases in cultural and social theory, more empirical studies and changes in policy making and implementation have called into question many of the conclusions of Bernstein’s work. Compensatory education was recommended for children who had allegedly suffered linguistic deprivation, a condition said to be rooted in the home life of the child and in particular in the mother–child relationship. Such policies have now been switched to working with schools to enable them to be more accommodating to all children, not just those with favoured cultural characteristics.

Box 2.2



Speech codes

Restricted or public speech codes are characterised by the following:

- 1 Short, grammatically simple, often unfinished sentences with a poor syntactical form (stressing the active voice).
- 2 Simple and repetitive use of conjunctions (so, because, then).
- 3 Little use of subordinate clauses to break down the initial categories of the dominant subject.
- 4 Inability to hold a formal subject through a speech sequence: thus a dislocated informational content is facilitated.
- 5 Rigid and limited use of adjectives and adverbs.
- 6 Infrequent use of impersonal pronouns as subjects of conditional clauses.
- 7 Frequent use of statements where the reason and conclusion are confounded to produce a categorical statement.

- 8 Using a large number of statements/phrases that signal a requirement for the previous speech sequence to be reinforced: Wouldn't it? You see? You know? etc. This process is termed sympathetic circularity.
- 9 Individual selection from a group of idiomatic phrases or sequence will frequently occur.
- 10 The individual qualification is implicit in the sentence organisation: it is a language of implicit meaning.

Elaborated or formal speech codes are characterised by the following:

- 1 Accurate grammatical order and syntax regulate what is said.
- 2 Logical modifications and stress are mediated through a grammatically complex sentence construction, especially through the use of a range of conjunctions and subordinate clauses.
- 3 Frequent use of prepositions

that indicate logical relationships as well as prepositions that indicate temporal and spatial contiguity.

- 4 Frequent use of the personal pronoun 'I'.
- 5 A discriminative selection from a range of adjectives and adverbs.
- 6 Individual qualification which is verbally mediated through the structure and relationships within and between sentences.
- 7 Expressive symbolism which discriminates between meanings within speech sequences rather than reinforcing dominant words or phrases, or accompanying the sequence in a diffuse, generalised manner.
- 8 Language use which points to the possibilities inherent in a conceptual hierarchy for the organising of experience.

(Bernstein, 1961: 169f., in Dittmar, 1976).

This switch has been prompted by empirical and theoretical work that has shown that all languages are characterised by the capacity for logical argument and abstract thought; the privileging of one form of language against others is a *political* and not a linguistic act. Consequently the reasons that children fail must be sought in the realms of social and political economy. It is in these areas that the work of Bernstein remains influential, as his linking of social structure with language opened up a wider investigation into ideas of dominant cultures and their formation, transmission and maintenance. By drawing attention to the social and political dimensions of cultural forms Bernstein rebutted the contention that language is simply a technical device for the representation and communication of culture.

Language, race and ethnicity

In 1966 Bereiter and Engelmann applied Bernstein's theories to the language of black children in the USA and concluded that 'the poor intellectual ability of Black lower class children is reflected in their inadequate speech' (Dittmar, 1976: 80) and the children showed 'a total lack of ability to use language as a device for acquiring and processing information. Language for them is unwieldy and not very useful' (Bereiter and Engelmann, 1966: 39, in Dittmar, 1976: 81). These conclusions were challenged by Labov (1972b) from the findings of a number of studies that he conducted on the use of non-standard English by black youths. His work demonstrated that the language

of black youth (Black English Vernacular or BEV) was different from that of middle-class speech forms; however, to describe BEV as a poor language was simply middle-class ideology. Labov criticised the data collection methods of Bereiter and Englemann's study on two counts: (a) the data did not describe natural black language use despite purporting to do so – in fact the material gathered was a set of responses to issues set by the researchers; (b) the interviewer in the study was a white adult – Labov contends that such a person would be seen by black youth as an authority figure, a representative of a dominant other culture, to whom they would not speak freely and openly. Although the criticism is a methodological one, it is another reminder that language and language use are political and that it is important to treat critically any claims that language speaks for everyone, everywhere, at all times.

The fabrication of language as a natural, politically neutral device which 'tells things as they are' is one of the means by which language and truth are associated. There is in English culture a widespread belief that nature and the natural are truthful and reliable since they are apparently outside the realm of human manipulation; language is, as we have seen, felt to be part of nature as it is so instinctive and taken for granted. It is a short step from these assumptions to see language as truth. This discourse about language offers the opportunity to know truth through language. In this reasoning language is extremely powerful for it both constitutes truth and guarantees truth. In this formulation, questions about language use and 'who speaks for whom?' are matters of great significance for whoever gives the account is able to pronounce the truth of things. Speakers and writers of non-standard language may suffer the fate of others claiming to speak for them or of their own accounts of their situation being declared untrue or unworthy of attention. Such practices have marked the discipline of literary criticism where, for example, writings from former colonial countries written in the metropolitan language have been declared not to be literature – due to two reasons: (a) local variants of the metropolitan language are not legitimate for the writing of literature; (b) writing about colonial or postcolonial society from the experiences of native peoples is not a legitimate

subject for literature. This example serves as another illustration of language as 'the medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated and the medium through which conceptions of 'truth', 'order', and 'reality' become established' (Ashcroft *et al.*, 1989).

In the face of the imperialising cultural power of metropolitan language the writers and speakers of local variations of the language are encouraged by their compatriots to treat the language as if it was their own. They are urged to shrug off the metropolitan meanings and associations of the language and to appropriate it for their own use and by these actions 'make language "bear the burden" of one's own cultural experience' (Ashcroft *et al.*, 1989: 38) in order to 'convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's own' (Rao, 1938: vii, in Ashcroft *et al.*, 1989: 39). An example of this can be seen in the extract from the poem 'Inglan is a Bitch' by the black British poet Linton Kwesi Johnson (see Box 2.13).

Box 2.3



Inglan is a bitch

w'en mi jus' come to Landan toun
 mi use to work pan di andahgroun
 but workin' pan di andahgroun
 y'u don't get fi know your way aroun'
 Inglan is a bitch
 dere's no escapin' it
 Inglan is a bitch
 dere's no runnin' whey fram it

Linton Kwesi Johnson

The work of Edward Said (1993) covers the same territory of cultural imperialism as cited above albeit with a perspective that illuminates how writers from metropolitan countries have, through their language, created an image of 'other societies' that is a product of language. His argument is that, alongside the devaluing of local culture and cultural products of 'other

societies', a parallel process has taken place in which metropolitan versions of these societies have been configured. These versions are in accord with the imaginings of metropolitan society, not with the experienced realities of native social actors. The example serves as a further illustration of the power of language to constitute the object of regard and simultaneously affirm the truth of that regard.

The force of the comments about the political use of language moves the discussion away from language as a technical instrument communicating politically neutral information to one that stresses that language takes its meaning from the social settings in which it operates. When it is used by the powerful it may be a subtle instrument of oppression, the more so because of its apparently neutral and natural attributes. In these circumstances it is no surprise that aspirant national groups seek to recreate or revivify local languages to symbolise their identity and carry the weight of their political ambition. The revival of Hebrew in the creation of the nation-state of Israel is one example; language as a political issue in Canada, Spain, France and Wales are other examples. In all these cases the intent is to rid themselves of **identities** (p. 142) imposed by the language of others. Such processes have also been central to the debates about 'political correctness' and language recently. So there has been a concern to change language use to eliminate oppressive uses and implications.

Language and gender

Elsewhere in this volume (Chapter 1) there is discussion of language as an expression of patriarchy. Just as postcolonial writers and speakers of non-standard language have protested that their voices are made inaudible or declared illegitimate by the power of dominant language, so women also assert that they are voiceless in language. As in the case of language and class discussed earlier in this chapter, the consideration of language and gender serves as a reminder that a language is not necessarily one's own even if one is a native speaker. The meaning and the power of language is determined by social practice; even a native speaker may be mute or dumb in certain settings. The suggestion is that this is the fate of women language users.

In this respect, Edwin Ardener (1974) suggested that 'women are often more "inarticulate" than men' by which he meant that the arenas of public discourse are typically dominated by men and the language of public discourse is 'encoded' with male meanings (Ardener, 1974: viii). The implication of this for women is that they must struggle to be heard and that they must learn male language.

Robin Lakoff (1975) is an influential early writer in the discussion of women and language; her book *Language and Women's Place*, which was based on the observation of her own and her friends' language use, set an agenda for the discussion of the topic, arguing that women's language is characteristically weak in form (not in content) and that this fits well with women's subordinate position *vis-à-vis* men. The characterisation of women's language as weak rests on Lakoff's assertion that women's speech has more 'tag' forms than men's speech. A typical example of a tag form is the statement 'It's a nice day, isn't it?'; in this example 'isn't it?' is the tag. The speaker is not seeking information but confirmation; there is the desire to achieve consensus with the hearer and the hearer is invited to participate in the statement and share the belief. Lakoff's contention is that women's speech is weaker than men's, less decisive and functionally less useful. Labov (1966), in his research on language and class, noted a gendered difference in language use which suggested that women were more deferential and less assertive than men. He found that lower middle-class women used fewer stigmatised forms than men of the same social class. The picture that emerges from this writing is one of highly gendered speech: men are said to use competitive, aggressive speech while women's speech is cooperative. Deborah Tannen (1990) argues that characteristics of the two forms of speech are so distinct that talk between men and women really represents a form of cross-cultural communication. In the language of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis men and women inhabit different thought worlds. The characteristics of male and female talk (Tannen 1990) are as follows:

<i>Male Talk</i>	<i>Female Talk</i>
Hierarchies	Network
Independence	Intimacy

Information	Sharing
Attention	Symmetry
Big talk	Small talk
Superiority	Inferiority
Powerful	Powerless

The issue of cross-cultural communication between men and women is addressed in the cartoon by Jacky Fleming in Figure 2.3.

Deborah Tannen's work introduces the consideration of an important issue in the study of language, communication and representation. The discussion of language using a sociolinguistic model has alerted us to how language is embedded in social practice and has drawn attention to the ways in which language is suffused with the significant structuring principles of society.

Although Tannen's findings are broadly consistent with those of Ardener and Lakoff, her interpretation stresses cultural difference (p. 121) rather than super- and subordination. She does not see women's language as inferior to men's as, for her, the two languages are directed towards the creation of different **discourses** (p. 21) about the world. This difference does not imply that women's talk is trivial or less functionally useful than men's; indeed she would argue that women's talk has many positive virtues, stressing, as it does, inclusion

rather than exclusion and cooperation rather than competition.

The possibility of interpreting gendered speech as difference rather than hierarchy reminds us that language is expressive and hence open to interpretation. Any discussion of language as a meaningful system must take account of the intentions of those who utter language and those who hear the utterances.

2.3 Mass communication and representation

Up to this point, this chapter has been primarily (though not exclusively) concerned with interpersonal communication and representation. This section relates more specifically to forms of mass communication – though obviously many issues already discussed, for example representation and ideology, relate to both interpersonal and mass communication.

The term 'mass communication' is generally used in academic studies to refer to the study of the mass media. The advent of mass media, and mass communication, is tied in with the history of printing. Block printing probably dates back to as early as the seventh century AD in China, but did not become commonplace in Europe until the fourteenth century. The advent of



Figure 2.3 Communication between men and women. (Source: Fleming, 1992.)

‘mass media’ is usually attributed to what are referred to as ‘popular prints’, which became popular in Europe from the fifteenth century onwards. These were commonly produced by woodcut printing, which were then crudely coloured by hand.

The mechanical printing press, invented by German goldsmith Johannes Gutenberg in 1447, greatly increased printing capabilities, speed and reduced costs, and would subsequently lead to the production of the first newspaper in Strasbourg, Germany, in the early seventeenth century. Throughout the seventeenth century there were many types of publications featuring ‘news’ stories, but across Europe in this period there starts to develop more regular and periodical publications, which we associate with contemporary newspapers.

The development of the mass media is then greatly enhanced by several key inventions in the nineteenth century, such as photography, the telephone, phonograph, cinematography, the wireless telegram and loudspeakers. Shortly after, the early twentieth century brings radio and talking film and television, and the importance of the mass media in our society begins to increase to the levels of saturation (seeping into every corner of our lives) that it has reached today.

This section, continuing the chapter’s overall theme, deals specifically with the issue of mass media representations, and specifically those of ethnicity, gender and celebrity. It then concludes with a discussion of audiences and reception and in particular highlights the important work of Stuart Hall on encoding and decoding.

The mass media and representation

As suggested earlier, it is important that we do not see visual imagery and the mass media as simply a window on the world, showing us ‘truth’ and ‘reality’. What the mass media gives us is a selected view of the world, which is always given to us from a certain perspective and angle. Hence, the mass media does not present the world, but rather gives a **representation** (p. 43) of it. Furthermore, there can never be an unbiased, objective representation of the world, as all representations come from humans and hence come from a particular pos-

ition or viewpoint (O’Shaughnessy and Sadler 1999). In particular, here we now turn to the issues of media representation of race/ethnicity, gender and celebrity as illustrations of this (though equally we could have considered other representations such as of age, disability, religion, nationality, sexuality, politics, sport, crime, plus numerous other social ‘groups’ or phenomenon).

Mass media representations of race and ethnicity

It is often assumed by the mass media that ethnic or ‘racial’ groups are fundamentally different, with ‘black’ and ‘white’ frequently set up as binary opposites. For example, films such as the *Indiana Jones* series portray a white male hero adventuring in ‘uncivilised’ lands populated by non-white dangerous and animal-like savages. Frequently films that cover Britain’s colonial history (such as *Zulu* or even *Carry On up the Khyber*) or any number of ‘cowboy’ films represent these as stories of native (non-white) ‘savages’ attacking the civilised (white) ‘settlers’. This association of ‘colour’ with good and evil even continues over to the dress of characters in many ‘cowboy’ films, where the hero would frequently wear a white hat, compared with the black hat of the villain. Hence, many film narratives perpetuate these ideas of fundamental white and non-white difference:

White	Non-White
Civilised	Primitive
Sophisticated	Savage
Rational	Irrational
Scientific	Magical
Good	Evil
	(O’Shaughnessy 1999: 237)

Stereotyped ways of portraying black and minority ethnic people in the mass media today may be less obvious, but are still apparent. For instance, non-white people continue to be stereotyped as ‘deviant’ and threatening by the mass media (Cole and Denny, 1994: 129). For instance, television shows, films, and popular music frequently portray black men as ‘gangsters’ or thugs, and black women as sexualised and permissive,

or generate **moral panics** (p. 238) around issues such as ‘immigration’ or ‘multiculturalism’ in Britain.

Van Dijk (1991) carried out an investigation into racism in the printed press and examined 2700 news articles on ethnic issues. Unsurprisingly his study suggested that the mass media is primarily run and produced by white people, who convey through this, dominant (often racist) ideological attitudes. However he suggests that racist views, such as not allowing immigrants into the country are constructed as ‘not being prejudiced’, but rather just ‘common sense’ (see **ideology** p. 35).

Though certain black celebrities (such as film or sport stars) are sometimes elevated and promoted by the mass media, these individuals can lose their ‘privileged status’ and be ‘re-raced’ when associated with deviance. For instance, O.J. Simpson’s ‘race’ was not an

issue while he was a successful American football player and film star, but became important in the way the national and international press treated him after he was accused of murder – such as accusing him of trying to ‘play the race card’ to gain sympathy during his trial. Furthermore, it is significant how the Olympic sprinter Ben Johnson was hailed as a Canadian hero when he won the gold medal in the 1988 Olympic Games until he tested positive for ‘performance enhancing’ drug use and was re-raced by the Canadian press as a ‘Jamaican immigrant’ (Davis and Harris, 1998).

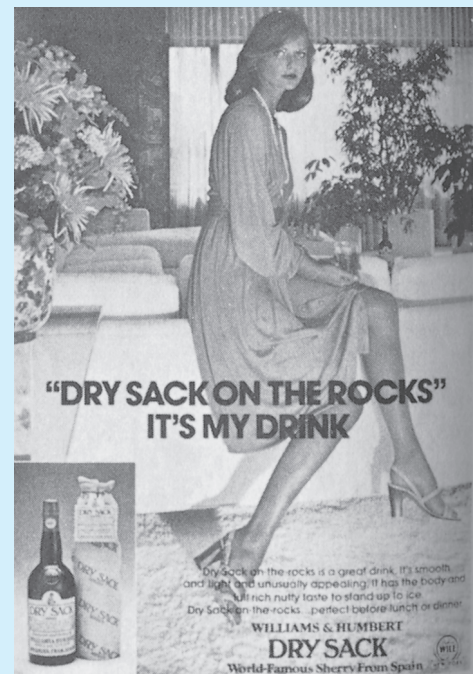
Today, images of black people are often used in advertising, film and music to represent something as ‘cool’, or part of ‘street’ or ‘urban’ culture. Though some could argue that through this, black culture is being portrayed in a more positive light, this is still a very

Box 2.4

The invisible man

This woman is looking at a man (who may coincide with the reader: he is drawn in): her words are in reply to his ‘what will you drink?’ Her dress is unbuttoned provocatively, indicating beyond doubt that the invisible character is male; the final factor is the chess set visible behind her, implying a second person, an intimacy, yet defining her intellectual quality in relation to the man, as does her decided preference for a certain drink. The message is that she is at home in a man’s world, yet is sexy; and not in a passive way, as is shown by her unbuttoning of her dress. Women (in media) are ‘entirely constituted by the gaze of man’. This woman is alone, is decisive and intellectual: ‘Femininity is pure, free, powerful; but man is everywhere around, he presses on all sides, he makes everything exist; he is in all eternity the creative absence. . . .’ The man in this picture is nowhere and everywhere, a pervasive presence defining and determining everything, and in whose terms the woman must define herself. She is doomed to see herself through his eyes, describe herself in his language.

(Williamson 1978: 80)



stereotypical and one-dimensional view of black people, and one that still carries many negative connotations and connections.

Mass media representations of gender

Tuchman (1981) referred to the 'symbolic annihilation of women' in popular culture – that is to say, either an absence, marginalisation or stereotyping of women in many aspects of popular culture, such as the mass media. Though, of course, there is some evidence of women taking more active and prominent roles within the mass media – for example, journalists, television presenters and movie or digital game action heroes, such as *Lara Croft* (in both games and films) – women continue to be largely portrayed in the mass media as sexual objects, and/or fulfilling their traditional roles as wives, mothers and partners. This is clearly visible in the way women are objectified in men's magazines and advertising, but also in other aspects of popular culture, such as in song lyrics. A good illustration of this is the song 'Wives and Lovers,' written by Burt Bacharach in the 1960s, which suggests a wife's primary role is to remain 'pretty' and take care of her man to ensure his fidelity. Of course, it could be argued that this song is now quite dated, but very similar sentiments are expressed in the Destiny's Child song 'Cater 2 U', from their 2004 album *Destiny Fulfilled*, which similarly suggests a woman's role is to 'keep her self up' and 'keep it tight', and 'cater to' their man by providing him with his dinner, a foot rub, a manicure, fetching his slippers, and much more, all on demand.

Tuchman (1981) suggests that the mass media reflects society, not as it really is, but rather how it would like to see itself. For instance, today two-parent headed households with two or three children are in the minority in Britain, but still, this is how the mass media tends to represent 'typical' British family life. Likewise, women are frequently portrayed in very traditional, or trivialised, roles.

This is even evident in the ways in which women are represented in the media in traditional 'male' domains, such as sport. For example, van Zoonen (1994) argues that in sport photography male athletes are always portrayed in active roles, their bodies hard and tough, never passive and never yielding to the viewer. Though

the rise in popularity of exercise and sport for women in recent years has increased the portrayal of women in the mass media in more active performing roles, Leath and Lumpkin (1992) suggests that women are still most likely to be depicted in the mass media in 'posed' rather than 'athletic' shots.

Hargreaves (1994) even goes as far to suggest that the portrayal of women in active sporting poses only further extends the male objectification of the female body – as these are still sexualised images. For example, how *The Sun* newspaper in 2003 printed a picture of tennis player Anna Kournikova every day (in its 'Kourni-corner') throughout that year's Wimbledon tennis tournament – irrespective of whether she played that day or not.

Even though we are now seeing situations where men, and in particular male athletes, are portrayed in the mass media in sexualised ways, Whelehan (2000: 131) argues that men remain represented in dominant strong roles, and more importantly, this does 'nothing to affect our perceptions of these men as people, or prompt us to question their fitness for work, their sexual propriety or anything else' – unlike women, men never become truly *objectified*.

Mass media representation of celebrity

Rojek (2001: 10) defines celebrity as 'the attraction of glamorous or notorious status to an individual within the public sphere'. By this he means that people gain celebrity status for either 'glamorous' reasons, such as super-models, footballers and pop stars, or for more 'notorious' reasons, such as serial killers or people who have committed 'lewd acts'.

Rojek suggest that although the idea of 'fame' may be historic (having existed for maybe thousands of years, in the form of monarchy and ancient 'heroes') 'celebrity' is very much a contemporary phenomenon. Rojek (2001) suggests that the rise in social importance of celebrities has occurred due to three main and inter-related historical processes:

- 1 The democratisation of society – which has increased our freedom of choice and allowed 'ordinary' people to rise to the status of celebrity.
- 2 The decline in organised religion – where in a

secular society celebrity culture replaces religious icons and role models.

- 3 The commodification of everyday life – where almost everything in life becomes commodified and purchasable, such as magazines which sell us insights into how to dress like celebrities, or celebrities themselves who sell us clothing ranges, perfumes or underwear bearing their names; such as *Glow* perfume by J-Lo or *Lovely* underwear by Kylie.

In particular, it is suggested that where ‘fame’ was once based upon success or achievement, contemporary celebrity is primarily a media creation or a ‘cultural fabrication’ (Rojek, 2001). As Schickel (1985: 47) argues, from the 1920s onwards:

reward began to detach itself from effort and from intrinsic merit, when the old reasonable correlation between what (and how) one did and what one received for doing it became tenuous (and, in the upper reaches of show biz, invisible).

Furthermore, Boorstin (1992: 57–61) draws a distinction between the historical ‘hero’ and contemporary ‘celebrity’:

The celebrity is a person who is known for his well-knownness ... The hero was distinguished by his achievement; the celebrity by his image or trademark. The hero created himself; the celebrity is created by the media. The hero is a big man [sic]; the celebrity is a big name.

Echoing the sentiments of Schickel (1985) and Boorstin (1992), as well as Monaco (1978) and numerous others, Rojek (2001) therefore distinguishes between three ‘types’ of celebrity:

- 1 Ascribed celebrity – which is celebrity status that typically follows bloodline and biological descent. The foundation of this celebrity is predetermined and something born into; for example, monarchy.
- 2 Achieved celebrity – derives from the (perceived) accomplishments of an individual in open competition. In the public realm these celebrities are recognised as individuals with rare talent. For example, early sporting stars such as Jesse Owen.
- 3 Attributed celebrity – result of the representation of

an individual as noteworthy or exceptional by cultural producers (such as the mass media), regardless of an individual’s actual talent or skill.

Achieved celebrity pre-dates the rise of the mass-media, and whilst those who were marked out for their significant achievements were widely known and talked about, key elements of their private self were secret from public view. By contrast the contemporary ‘achieved’ celebrity is ever present and open to digestion through various arms of the mass media, and as such, become much dependent upon their ‘public’ face.

The contemporary celebrity is therefore closely associated with the mass media and a **postmodern** (p. 295) era, where depth or meaning are no longer important, and increasingly what is important is surface and image. It does not really matter what David Beckham or Brad Pitt are *really* like – all that matters is their media and celebrity images, which become disconnected from any sense of reality. For instance, in his book on David Beckman, Ellis Cashmore (2002) utilises the work of Andy Warhol, and in particular his repetition of images of stars such as Marilyn Monroe and Elvis Presley, to highlight the way in which contemporary celebrities are produced and reproduced like any other consumer commodity by the mass media. And as Cashmore (2002: 192) writes, David Beckham is ‘as much a [media] construction as Bob the Builder or Tony Soprano – a product of imagination and industry, rather than exploits’.

However, the mass media created ‘celebrity’ can be very short-lived. Rojek (2001) suggests that the term celebrity is linked to the Latin word *celere*, which means ‘swift’, and therefore in doing so highlights the precarious nature of celebrities. In particular, he identifies what he refers to as ‘celetoids’, who are individuals who command media attention for only a very short period of time. Examples include lottery winners, stalkers, streakers or kiss-and-tellers. In particular, celetoids are often constructed around sexual scandal, such as Monica Lewinsky, who had an affair with the (then) US president Bill Clinton. The celetoid receives their moment of fame and then disappears from public consciousness rapidly, although they can achieve a degree of longevity – such as Monica Lewinsky who in the period after her affair, launched her own brand of

handbags and appeared on several chat and ‘reality’ television shows, and gave numerous interviews to newspapers and magazines.

Similarly, just as celebrity fades, so too can media and public adulation be transformed into revulsion. Many celebrities have seen their celebrity ‘glamorous’ status pulled from under them, and replaced with one of shame and ‘notoriety’. This is particularly common in sport, where very easily, failures, or off-field behaviour can turn stars into villains overnight. A good example being the life and changing (media) fortunes of the one time professional footballer Paul ‘Gazza’ Gascoigne. Gascoigne’s career and life has continuously been the focus of British tabloid journalism for well over a decade.

His life has been recounted like that of a soap character, featuring the highs of his success (and England’s *almost* success) at the 1990 football World Cup finals, which ended (literally) in tears for Gascoigne, to the lows of his struggles with his weight and depression and admission of abuse toward his wife (see Giulianotti and Gerrad 2001). Though undoubtedly Paul Gascoigne was a footballer of great talent, it was his tears in 1990, not his talent, which made him a celebrity, and this is a celebrity that was maintained by continued media interest in his private life, long after his professional career had ended.

Audiences and reception

This chapter has highlighted the processes of communications and representation as involving complex patterns of interaction and interpretation between the sender and receiver of a ‘message’. The relationship between message or textual production and its reception should be understood as a complex cycle, rather than a unidirectional process. However, it is still frequently the case that the production (or ‘encoding’ processes) of a text or message are given precedence in many studies of communication and the mass media, at the expense of reception (or ‘decoding’ processes). However, an important contribution to our understanding of both these encoding and decoding processes is the work of Stuart Hall (p. 55).

Stuart Hall: encoding, decoding and ideology

Work on the media developed and operationalised some of the key debates on **ideology**. In particular the research carried out at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (p. 241) was hugely influential. The cornerstone of this was the work of Stuart Hall.

In ‘Encoding/decoding’, Hall (1980) argues that television programmes, and by implication all other forms of text, should be understood as ‘meaningful discourse’ (p. 21). In the language of **structuralism** (p. 17) and

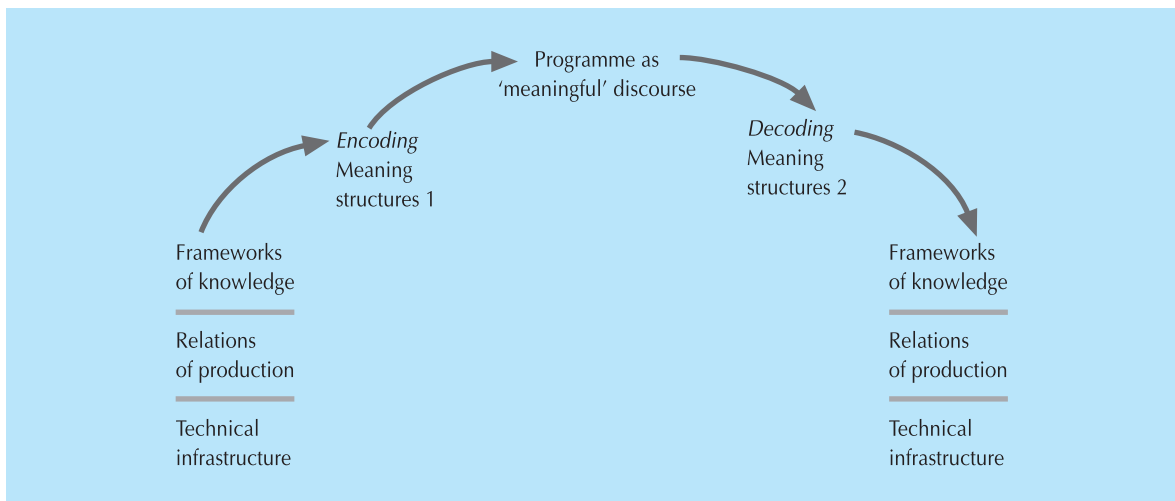


Figure 2.4 Encoding and decoding. (Source: Hall, 1980: 130.)

Key influence 2.2



Stuart Hall (1932–)

Stuart Hall is a Jamaican-born intellectual and political activist who can in many senses be seen as the crucial figure in the development of contemporary cultural studies through his own work, his stimulation of others and his continued attention to the interconnections between politics and the pursuit of knowledge.

Born into a middle-class family, Hall left Jamaica in 1951 to study at Oxford. He was active in left politics and became the first editor of *New Left Review* in 1960. In 1964 he was appointed as deputy director (to Richard Hoggart) of the newly created **Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies** (p. 241). He subsequently became director, before taking the Chair of Sociology at the Open University in 1979.

Hall's early engagement with the New Left stimulated his interest in popular culture and he published an important text with Paddy Whannel, *The Popular Arts* (1964). This interest continued in a number of papers on diverse topics in the area of media and communication, including news photographs, the magazine *Picture Post*, and news and current affairs television. His ongoing

concern with issues of race was combined with this emphasis in the influential (collectively authored) *Policing the Crisis* (1978). He wrote on subcultures specifically on hippies, but most importantly in the key collective text *Resistance through Rituals* (1976). His theoretical interests were developed in papers on ideology, which were influenced by both Althusser and **Gramsci** (p. 38). He was one of the first leftist analysts to confront Thatcherism and from 1979 on developed an analysis and critique based in a Gramscian approach. This resulted in the concept of 'authoritarian populism', *The Politics of Thatcherism* (1983) and *New Times* (1989), both edited with Martin Jacques. Confronting **postmodernism** (p. 295) led Hall to increased concern with issues around 'race' and '**identity**' (p. 142) in the 1990s, when he also continued to reflect on the development of 'cultural studies'.

The impact of Hall's own work, centred on the interconnections between **ideology** (p. 35), identity, culture and politics, on cultural studies cannot be overestimated. He remains at the cutting edge of devel-

opments, continuing to argue for the relevance of a sophisticated Marxism to the understanding of contemporary social formations, as well as a force for social change. Moreover, especially during his time at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham, he influenced a generation of researchers who were themselves to become some of the leading writers in the field. His commitment to collective work is reflected in his joint authorship and editorship of many volumes.

Further reading

Morley, D. and Chen, K.-H. (eds) (1996) *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, London: Routledge.

Hall, S. and Jefferson, T. (eds) (1976) *Resistance through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-war Britain*, London: Hutchinson.

Hall, S., Critcher, C., Jefferson, T., Clarke, J. and Roberts, B. (1978) *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order*, London: Macmillan.

semiotics (p. 29) introduced earlier in this chapter, they consist of codes. To achieve this status they must be encoded by those involved in their production, and be capable of being decoded by the audiences who watch them. They are social phenomena subject to struggle and change. These relationships are summarised by Hall in the diagram reproduced in Figure 2.4.

Hall argues that the television text, or sign, is very complex; furthermore that it can be decoded in different ways by the audience. Hall identifies three positions 'from which decodings of a televisual discourse may be constructed' (1980: 136). These he calls

the 'dominant-hegemonic', the 'negotiated' and the 'oppositional' (1980: 136–8). In the dominant-**hegemonic** position (p. 73) the logic of the television programme is gone along with.

When the viewer takes the connoted meaning from, say, a television newscast or current affairs programme full and straight, and decodes the message in terms of the references code in which it has been encoded, we might say that the viewer is *operating inside the dominant code*.

(Hall, 1980: 136)

The negotiated code may also operate within this framework, but will allow for disagreements within it. Thus, on the basis of experience, for example, there may be specific challenges to aspects of the dominant frame.

Decoding within the *negotiated version* contains a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements: it acknowledges the legitimacy of the hegemonic definitions to make grand significations (abstract), while, at a more restricted, situational (situated) level, it makes its own ground rules – it operates with exceptions to the rule.

(Hall, 1980: 137)

In the oppositional position the dominant framework is directly resisted, in a 'globally contrary way' (Hall, 1980: 137–8).

These potential positions were empirically considered by Morley (1980). Reiterating the influence of the sociologist Frank Parkin (1973) on his and Hall's position, Morley found evidence for the existence of the different positions among social groups to which he showed examples of the British current affairs magazine programme *Nationwide* (see further Abercrombie, 1996; Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998).

Audiences

The work of Stuart Hall on encoding/decoding was (and continues to be) significant for the study of audiences. Prior to the work of Hall and his colleagues at the University of Birmingham, audience members were frequently cast as 'passive dopes' (Garfinkel 1967) who passively absorbed messages communicated to them by the mass media. This is the attitude towards audiences that appears to be conveyed by **Frankfurt School** writers such as Theodor Adorno (p. 75), and it is also the attitude of many (even contemporary) psychological studies of audiences, such as the perceived 'effect' of media violence on individuals (p. 193).

This perspective of audience members as passive recipients of mass media 'messages' (Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998)) refers to as the *Behavioural Paradigm* of audience research. However, they suggest that the influential work of authors such as Stuart Hall

led to a recognition that audiences are not passive, but can actively 'decode' and engage with texts. This then leads to the development of a new paradigm in audience research, which they call the *Incorporation/Resistance Paradigm*.

In this model audiences are seen as more active in their consumption, where the messages conveyed by the mass media are reinterpreted or even rejected (resisted) by audience members (see **resistance** p. 170). Put simply, they suggest that the focus of this paradigm is on 'whether audience members were incorporated into dominant ideology by their participation in media activity, or whether to the contrary, they are resistant to that incorporation' (1998: 15).

However, Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) argue that there are a number of weaknesses with this paradigm. These include, most notably, that the power an audience has to resist or reinterpret the messages the mass media conveys to them is often overstated within this paradigm, and second, that there exists little empirical evidence to support this paradigmatic framework – on the contrary, as audiences becoming more skilled in their media use, their responses and actions are less likely to conform to this simple model.

In particular, Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) argue there is now occurring a shift towards a new paradigm, and this they refer to as the *Spectacle/Performance Paradigm*. They suggest that within an increasingly spectacular and performative (**postmodern** – p. 295) society individuals become part of a 'diffused audience'. That is to say, we draw on the mass media as a resource and use this in our everyday social performances, rendering us (and others) both performances, and audiences to others' performances, in our everyday lives.

The Incorporation/Resistance Paradigm therefore recognises audiences as not the passive product of production/text process, while more contemporary debates (within a Spectacle/Performance Paradigm) allow us to break down the boundaries between production/text/consumption, and see audiences as both consumers and producers of texts and performances.

2.4 Conclusion

In this chapter we have considered the social and cultural importance of communication and representation. In particular, we have highlighted that unlike early theorisations of communication, such as that offered by Claude Elwood Shannon, communication is not a simple straightforward process of a sender constructing a message and sending it to a receiver, who understands the message in exactly the way it was intended. Communication is rather, an extremely complex process. In particular, we have illustrated how the form of a message (or 'text'), such as being spoken, written or visual, can shape its meaning. Through a discussion of meanings and semiotics, we have also shown how the meanings attached to signs (such as words) are arbitrary, and hence language and meaning is not a straightforward and simple association. However, it is argued that the association between a sign and its meaning is a structured one, and this is illustrated with the work authors such as de Saussure, Chomsky and Lévi-Strauss, and also the ideological nature of meaning. This, however, is challenged by hermeneutics, poststructuralism and postmodernism, which emphasise the more subjective and/or fluid nature of meanings in contemporary society.

This chapter also highlights the importance of recognising the complexities involved in processes of representation, and also the power relations intrinsic to this. In particular, it considers the role language plays in structuring gender, race and ethnicity and social class. Finally, in this chapter we have consider mass media representations of gender, race and ethnicity, and celebrity, and again highlighted the important role that meanings represented through the mass media can have in shaping our understanding of cultural forms and 'groupings'. But here we also highlight the important work of Stuart Hall, which makes us aware that mass media 'messages' need not always be accepted or encountered in the way they were intended, and that audiences have the ability to 'decode' and reinterpret 'texts'.

Recap

- Communication and representation are a complex process and cycle of making meanings, interpretation and re-interpretation.
- Communication and representation are not neutral, but rather can be value-laden.
- That it is through language and communication that we make sense of our world, and through this, help shape our world.

Further reading

An excellent short introduction to issues of language and representation, especially as discussed in the structuralist and semiotic viewpoints, can be found in Terence Hawkes, *Structuralism and Semiotics* (1977). The classic study which applies these to advertising is Judith Williamson *Decoding Advertisements: Ideology and Meaning in Advertising* (1978), which might be used to prompt analyses of your own. Connections between representation and power (especially of class and gender) are economically and influentially dealt with by John Berger in *Ways of Seeing* (1972). John Fiske and John Hartley, *Reading Television* (1978) apply semiotics to television; Fiske's *Television Culture* (1987) develops the argument and approach. And a good introduction to the Mass Media is O'Shaughnessy and Sadler's *Media and Society: An Introduction* (1999).