



Prifysgol Cymru
Y Drindod Dewi Sant
University of Wales
Trinity Saint David

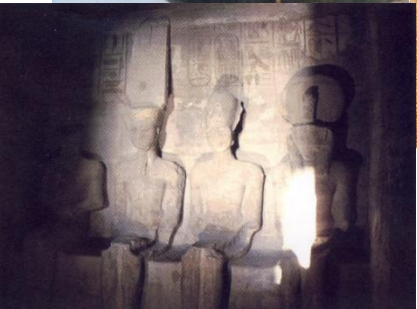
Canolfan Sophia
The Sophia Centre

Culture, Material Culture and Symbol

Nick Campion

Associate Professor in Cosmology
and Culture

Culture and Symbol

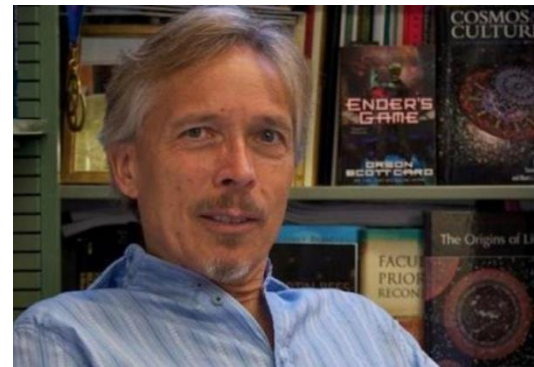


A Cultural Approach to the Universe

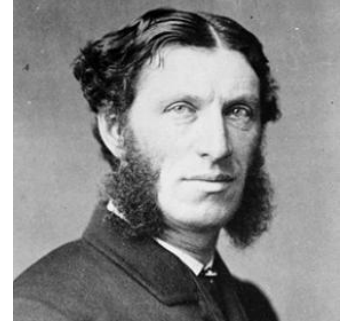
“‘The universe is made of stories, not of atoms’, said poet and political activist Muriel Rukeyser”. I agree’

Chris Impey, *How it Ends: from you to the universe*, New York: W.W. Norton and Co, 2010, p. 11, citing Muriel Rukeyser, “The Speed of Darkness” IX, from *The Collected Poems of Muriel Rukeyser*. 2006, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail/56287>.

Impey is University Distinguished Professor, Department of Astronomy, University of Arizona



Culture v Nature



The notion of culture as 'high' culture, and distinct from nature was articulated by Matthew Arnold in *Culture and Anarchy*

'[culture is] the best which has been thought and said'
(Preface to *Culture and Anarchy*)

Published 1867-8, published as a book 1869, preface added 1875.

On line at

<http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/4212>

<http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/4212/pg4212.html>



Prifysgol Cymru
Y Drindod Dewi Sant
University of Wales
Trinity Saint David

A foundational – and holistic - definition (i.e. theory) of culture

'Culture, or Civilisation, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society'.

Tylor, Edward Burnett, *Primitive Culture*, 3 Vols., New York: Harper Torchbooks 1958 [London: Murray 1871], Vol. I, 'The origins of Culture', p. 1.

•



The BBC web page – 'Arts and Culture': is culture synonymous with the arts?

Arts and culture ×



[Wagner's Ring Cycle: 15 hours of epic opera](#)

BBC ARTS



 Japanese manga artist Jiro Taniguchi dies aged 69

BBC WORLD SERVICE



 Victorian pioneer 'most prolific artist'

ENGLAND

Different definitions of Culture

Raymond Williams

In attempting to understand the continuous development of words and language 'I found myself preoccupied by a single word, culture.'

"Culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language."

Suggests three definitions for the word:

- I – Culture associated with Education (including religion), derived from the 18th century: of a spiritual and aesthetic development.
- II - Culture associated with society, suggested by Herder and Klemm: 'a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period, a group, or humanity in general.'
- III – Culture associated with art: 'culture is music, literature, painting and sculpture, theatre and film.'

Raymond Williams, *Keywords, A vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985) pp 12, 87, 90.

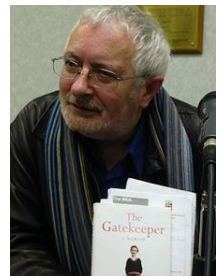
I and III correspond to Tylor

II introduces a new feature – culture as the general behaviour of human beings



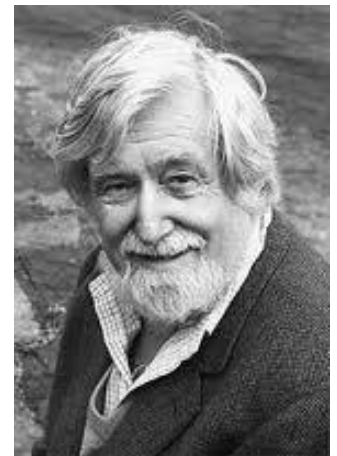
Problems of defining Culture

- *"Culture" is said to be one of the two or three most complex words in the English language, and the term which is sometimes considered to be its opposite - nature - is commonly awarded the accolade of being the most complex of all'.*
- Eagleton, Terry, *The Idea of Culture*, Oxford: Blackwell 2000, p. 1. (referring to Raymond Williams).



Culture and Symbol

- Culture is *'an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic form'*.
- Geertz, Clifford, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York: Basic Books, 1973, p. 99. See also Geertz, Clifford, 'Religion as a Cultural System', in Religion as a Cultural System, in: Banton, Michael P. (ed.): *Anthropological approaches to the study of religion*. London/UK 1966: Tavistock and New York: Frederick A. Praeger Press, 1966, p. 3.
- http://www.iwp.uni-linz.ac.at/lxe/sektktf/gg/GeertzTexts/Religion_System.htm.



What is a symbol?

Classical definition: a thing that both represents something else and **shares the essence of that thing**, in which case they are **active agents**: they have **agency**

Modern definition: a thing that represents something else

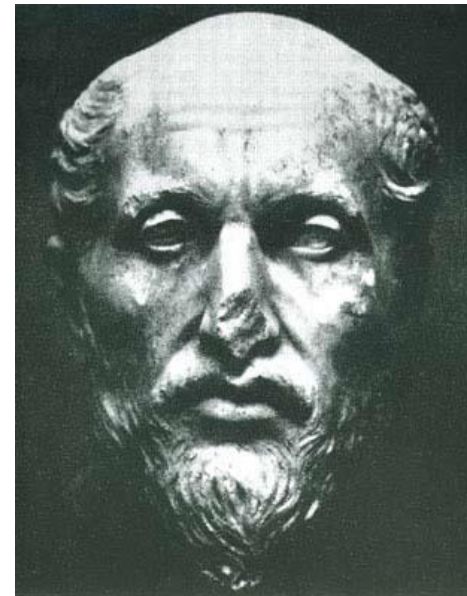


Symbols as Active Agents

‘It is the power of ineffable symbols comprehended by the gods alone that establishes theurgical union. Thus, we don’t perform these acts intellectually...In fact, **these very symbols, by themselves, perform their own work**, and the ineffable power of the Gods with which these symbols are charged, itself, recognizes, by itself, its own images. **It is not awakened to this by our thinking**’.

Iamblichus, *De mysteriis*, 96:13–97.9, in Gregory Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul: The Neoplatonism of Iamblichus* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), p. 84.

- *Is the symbol alive?*

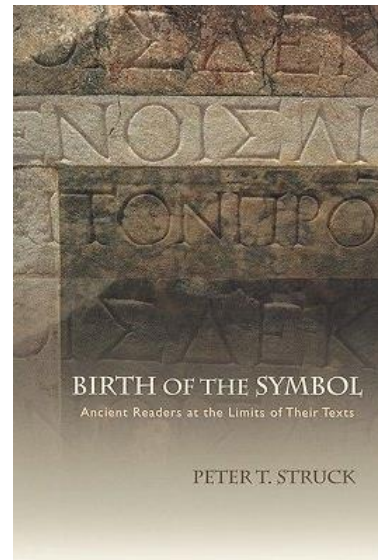
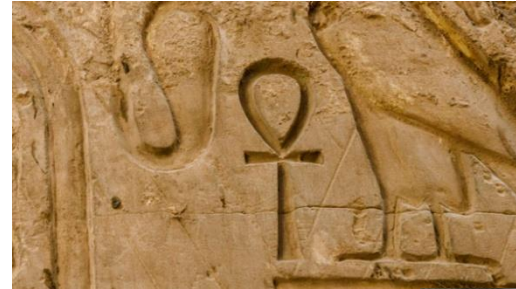


The symbol as real

A symbol is

... a form of representation that has **an intimate, ontological connection with its referent** and is no mere mechanical replication of the world, that is **transformative** and **opens up a realm beyond rational experience**, that **exists simultaneously as a concrete thing and as an abstract and perhaps transcendent truth**, and that **conveys a unique density of meaning**.

Struck, Peter, *The Birth of the Symbol*
(Princeton: Princeton University Press,
2004), p. 5.



Clement of Alexandria (c.150-215 CE)

On the Egyptians:

‘When they want to indicate the sun, for example, they make a circle, and the moon a crescent shape, according to the literal form...Other things they engrave figuratively...and they transpose and alter their character; they change some things, others they recast entirely’.

Clement, *Stromateis* 5.4.20–21, in Peter Struck, *The Birth of the Symbol: Ancient Readers at the Limits of Their Texts* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 199.



Symbol and Culture



‘**Without symbolism there could be no culture...**Culture is not itself formed of symbols, but of the meaning that lies behind and unites symbols. This meaning only exists in the minds of participants in culture, but it is acted out through the manipulation of symbols, which objectify meaning’.

- [Mary LeCron Foster, ‘Symbolism: The Foundation of Culture’, in Tim Ingold (ed.), *The Companion Encyclopaedia of Anthropology* (London, 1994), pp. 366-95, on p. 366]
- Lecturer in Anthropology at California State University, d.2003

‘Symbolism arose and evolved into human culture because of a growing appreciation and social utilization of **abstract likenesses between objects and events** separated in time and space’.

‘Symbolism’, p. 370.

a symbol ‘is any entity that has **socially participative meaning**’.

‘Symbolism’, p. 366.

i.e. a symbol is **purely representational and has no agency**. It has only the power we give it.

Symbol as Ritual, Gesture, Container for Meaning

Victor Turner

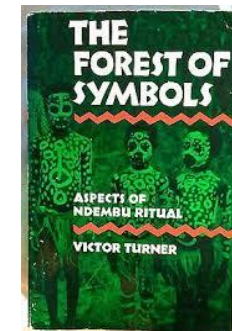
- defines symbol as 'the smallest unit of ritual' which retains all the 'properties of ritual behaviour.'
- These symbols can take the form of words, gestures or activities which means that rituals are symbols that form a stereotypical sequence of activities which are 'performed in a sequestered place' with the aim of influencing 'preternatural entities or forces' that are not given over to technological routines.
- Rituals are vehicles or containers which consist of meaningful symbols by which information about the underpinning values or beliefs of a culture or community is outwardly divulged.

Victor Turner. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Oxford/New York, Routledge Publishers, 2017 [1969]) p. 1-2

Victor Turner. *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (United States of America: Cornell University Press, 1975) p. 183;

Turner, Victor. *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press, 1970 [1967]) p. 19;

Victor Turner and Edith Turner. *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture* (Oxford/New York, Columbia University Press, 1978) p. 243



Materiality

1(a). The study of material objects and their significance, as opposed to the study of dogma, ideas, theology etc. (b) The study of human beings as embodied beings

2. The new materiality, in which material objects are things in themselves.



Material Religion

- **'Material Religion (is) a new project in the study of religious images, objects, spaces, and material practices.** The study of religion may be conducted through any number of lenses. One may regard religion through the lens of **narratives**, or documents such as sermons and doctrinal statements. Other scholars will stress the importance of understanding religion in terms of its **institutions**, or its **leading figures**, or in the way in which it takes shape in such **social forces** as revival, revolution, urbanization, or migration. **Material Religion sets out to consider religion through the lens of its material forms and their use in religious practice. Of course, the investigation of things'.**
- The Editors, 'Editorial Statement', *Material Religion*, March 2005, Vol. 1 Issue 1, pp. 4-8 (p. 4).

'If culture is the full range of thoughts, feelings, objects, words, and practices that human beings use to construct and maintain the life-worlds in which they exist, **material culture is any aspect of that world-making activity that happens in material form.** That means things, but also includes the feelings, values, fears, and obsessions that inform one's understanding and use of things'.

Morgan, David, 'The materiality of cultural construction', *Material Religion*, 2008, Vol. 4 no 2, pp 228-9 (228)



Material Religion includes both 'things' and action

Examples: Icons, images, statues, incense, mass produced artefacts, sacred spaces, temples, stone circles, art, liturgical objects, music, relics, ceremonial dress, etc.

Practices: ceremony, display, ritual, magic, pilgrimage.

Anything that relates directly to the senses

Orthopraxy: religion is a matter of correct (and even not so correct but ordinary) action

As opposed to

Orthodoxy: religion is a matter of correct belief

Rituals/Performances

Festivals

Pilgrimages

Utterances and gestures

Costuming

Feasting/eating

And many more!

Can all religions be considered 'material'?

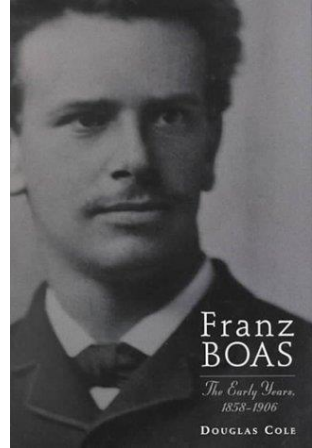
Conference: 'Material Religion: Embodiment, Materiality, Technology' – Duke University, Sept. 2015

- Themes: 'tools' and 'technologies' of religious performance. Agency, embodiment, sensation, imagination, aesthetics, sacred space, interfaces between performance, magic, prayer, hearing, acts and action, dance and imagery... transformation. Human bodies are ritual tools of devotion.

Material imagery and actions



Cultural Anthropology



The study of the anthropos (Greek = man)

•

In the 19th century culture was often synonymous with race

Franz Boas (1858-1942) critiqued the notion of race as a meaningless category by demonstrating the influence of environmental factors on physiology in a major study of immigrants to the USA.

Boas and his students at Columbia University then established the discipline of **CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY**

Cultural Anthropology emphasises a number of central features:

1. Cross-cultural comparison: cultures can be understood by comparison with other cultures
2. Holism: the assumption that cultures must be known in their entirety
3. Cultural relativism: each culture can be understood on its own terms

•

Social Anthropology: the Critique of Cultural Anthropology



SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY developed in the UK under A.R. Radcliffe-Brown (1881-1955), who argued that:

The idea of culture is an abstraction, a construction of anthropologists not necessarily related to the complexity of real conditions.

Instead, anthropologists must therefore study actual social structures – such as family relationships - and human behaviour

‘You cannot have a science of culture. You can study culture only as characteristic of a social system...If you study culture, you are always studying the acts of behaviour of a specific set of persons who are linked by a social structure’.

MANY WOULD ARGUED THAT THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN CULTURAL AND SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY NOW HARDLY EXISTS



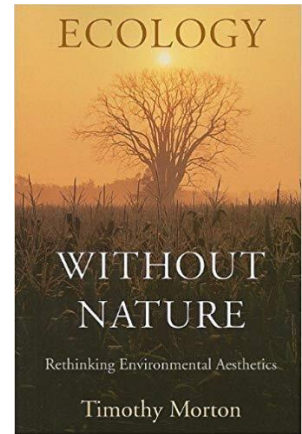
What is Nature?

Does 'Nature' with a capital 'N', exist as something outside us?

Do we make a false distinction between the 'Natural' and the 'Artificial'?

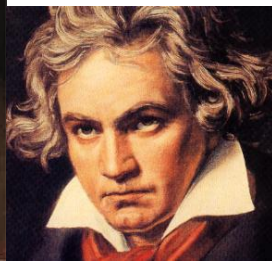
Is the Nature – Culture divide a fiction?

Timothy Moreton, *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*. Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 2007.



Culture and Nature

- A crucial question:
- Does culture differentiate humanity from nature
- does the creation of great art raise us above our animal natures?
- Or Does culture emerge from nature?
- E.g. The culture of football hooligans
- And do animals have culture?



Essentialism



‘Essentialism’ , **‘substantialism’** or **‘universalism’**, proposes that there is something **essential** to humanity, or to life in general, which cannot be reduced to context and which may be influenced by, but is not generated by, culture.

That is, there is a real underlying ‘essence’ underpinning the entire world. This essence is usually conceived as being psychic or psychological.

Culture is a manifestation of this underlying essence or substance.

The tradition of essentialism in the western world is traced to Plato and his notion that there are ‘Ideas’ or ‘Forms’ (later known as ‘Archetypes’ which underpin all human psychology.

This returns us to a classical idea of symbols as real and participatory

Leading modern essentialists include C. G. Jung and religious historians influenced by him, such as Mircea Eliade, Gilles Quispel and Joseph Campbell.

Counter arguments:

Apparently universal phenomena are not really as similar as they seem.

Local variations are dominant and challenge the idea that there are universal



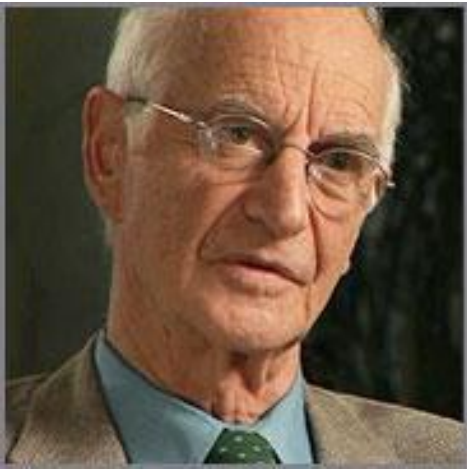
Prifysgol Cymru
Y Drindod Dewi Sant
University of Wales
Trinity Saint David

Culture and Archetypes

Referring to archetypal patterns, the psychologist James Hillman wrote that

‘To study human nature at its most basic level, one must turn to culture (mythology, religion, art, architecture, epic, drama, ritual) where these patterns are portrayed’.

Hillman, James, *Archetypal Psychology* (London, Spring Publications, 2013 [1981]), p. 14.



The Ontological Turn



Normal discussions of culture assume that it is variable, but that nature is constant.

The Ontological Turn asserts that nature is variable. This does not mean that the laws of physics vary: if you drop a stone it falls down.

However, it does mean that the worlds people live in can be very different. For example, if you live in a world in which nature is alive and communicates with you, then nature is alive and communicates with you.

The same extends to animals. What may appear to people to be a pile of mud on a river bank may be a palace to a Hippopotamus living in Hippopotamus world.

And, for people who believe that the planets communicate with them, that is their world.

Heywood, Paulo, 'The Ontological Turn', *The Cambridge Encyclopaedia of Anthropology*, 2017,

<http://www.anthroencyclopedia.com/entry/ontological-turn>

How do we see the sky? Are we culturally conditioned?
Do you look at the light or the dark? What do you see?



Prifysgol Cymru
Y Drindod Dewi Sant
University of Wales
Trinity Saint David

Reading

Struck, Peter, *The Birth of the Symbol* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

On line through the University Library

Morgan, David (ed.), *Religion and Material Culture: The Matter of Belief* (London: Bloomsbury 2009).

Geertz, Clifford, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

Neither Morgan's