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Contemporary Culture, Cultural Studies and the Global Mediasphere

INTRODUCTION: THE CONTEMPORARY SETTING

In 1997 Diana Spencer, Princess of Wales, was killed in a car accident in Paris. The driver was well over the legal alcohol limit and was travelling at speeds in excess of 200 kilometres an hour. While we might condemn the recklessness of the group, a global audience of around 2.5 billion people watched the laying to rest of the 'People's Princess', making it the most watched event in all human history. Also in 1997 the highest grossing movie of all times, *Titanic*, was released; over the following decade the film earned around \$US600m and reached audiences in 120 countries. Around the same year the annual earnings of the North American pop singer Celine Dion were \$US55.5 million, although this figure is well short of the Rolling Stones' tour earnings in 2005 which reached \$US135m. In 2006 the annual earnings of movie director Steven Spielberg had topped \$US360 million, which was about the same as the annual profit of global news broadcaster CNN. All of these figures, however, seem modest when measured against the annual earnings of the Fox Entertainment Group, which generates annual revenues of \$US10 billion and holds around \$US24 billion in media assets worldwide.

Such immense sums have been generated through the expansion of major media corporations and the absorption of media audiences into global networked communication systems. Satellite, cable and wireless digital technologies have allowed media organizations to distribute their products across most areas of the world, from affluent urban centres to provincial villages in Suluwesi, Nigeria and the Amazon Delta. But these technologies are not, of themselves, a reason for the extraordinary growth in global media that has occurred over the past two to three decades. Media texts – music, TV, film, print, Internet – meet their audiences in a complex intersection of systems and personal imaginings. To this end, the transformation of the world into a *global media sphere* is the result of a dynamic

interaction between macro processes (history, economy, technology, politics and modes of social organization) and the profoundly intimate and intricate microcosms of a person's life – the realm of the individual subject. Culture, in a very profound sense, is formed through these processes: an assemblage of dynamic engagements that reverberate through and within individual subjects and the systems of meaning-making of which they are an integral part.

In this way, the collective 'audience' and each individual viewing subject contribute significantly to the formation and representation of events like the Diana funeral. Viewers of the funeral, like the audiences of the Twin Towers attack in 2001 or the World Cup Football of 2006, were participants in the dynamic of culture and the transformation of global spaces into the new media sphere. Significantly, many people continue to speculate that Diana's death was caused by the media, both literally and metaphorically. At the time of the accident, Diana and her companions were attempting to escape the intrusions of the rogue celebrity press, the paparazzi. Of course, Diana was also part of a broader public interest and imagining. She had appeared often in the major, mainstream media, and her life and personal struggles had become a significant part of the everyday lives and experiences of 'ordinary' people. To this extent, Diana was a media and cultural product like any other 'text' or celebrity. However partially or impermanently, the characters, events, celebrities and texts that are constituted through the media are a fundamental part of our culture.

Warfare, tragedy, love, desire, struggle, relationships – all are mediated for us and implicated in our everyday experiences. The Rolling Stones, Tom Cruise, the attack on the Twin Towers in New York and the Columbine High School killings become real for us – emotionally and cognitively present in our daily contemplations, conversations, pleasures, imaginings and pains. They provide a resource for the management of our own problems, relationships, actions, politics, judgements and processes of persuasion. They become part of who we are and how we understand the world around us. They become our reality.

Thus, the media is not just a conduit for the transfer of meanings from the central corporation to audiences; the media are part of a generalized context and interplay of meaning-making. The media do not exist 'out there', but are immersed in the everyday practices and meaning-making of individuals and communities across the globe: they are a significant resource in the formation and construction of contemporary culture(s).

Yet culture is shaped through two quite contrary impulses: one toward the greater congregation of shared meanings (values, practices, texts, beliefs); the other toward change and greater dispersal. While we will speak a little more about dispersal below, we can establish here that the media is profoundly implicated in the process of meaning aggregation, a process that is essential through all gradients of cultural formation. All societies, that is, must communicate and commune through the formation of overlapping or contiguous social imaginings – the sense of participating in 'the group' through the mutual and interdependent construction of meaning. Thus, culture is that

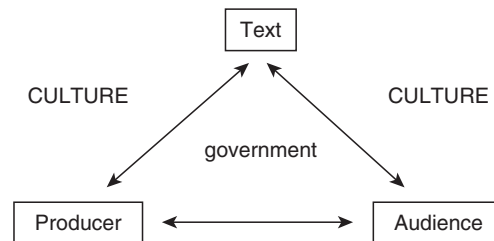


Figure 1.1 *Culture, the media and meaning-making*

Source: Lewis 2005, p. 6.

shared (imagined-meaning) space where the media and audiences interact. Figure 1.1 gives us some sense of how this interaction takes place.

Each apex in Figure 1.1 is interacting with all other elements. This is a dynamic and ceaseless inter-flow of parts, moving through various social gradients in order to generate meaning –

- **Media producers** include all those people, institutions, regulations and processes who/which contribute to the formation of texts. Text producers may be professional and corporate, or non-professional individuals and communities who create texts online, photographs, home videos, art, poems and so on. Producers draw on the vast ‘library’ of meanings that already exist in culture, including their own professional judgement, to create their texts.
- **Texts** include every form of mediation in language, sound, smell and image. Media texts may include handycam home videos, garage music, blockbuster movies, websites, books, Internet downloads, TV news, and so on. These texts may be broadcast distribution (including global), or narrowcast (including person to person).
- **Audiences** include any form of text consumer at any level of production or reception. Audiences are not passive receivers of messages, as early media theory imagined (see Chapter 8). Rather, they are active creators of meaning, drawing on their own personal store of pre-existing experiences and meanings, as well as specific texts and the vast ‘library’ of imaginings and meanings that are held within culture itself. To this end, an audience body may be formed across broad social gradients from huge, global constituencies, to highly localized and specialist consuming communities.

As will be outlined below, this ‘pre-existing library of meanings’ that are held within culture might equally be understood as the invisible ‘knowledge’ which shapes, and is shaped by, the individual and collective consciousness of a given social group. This consciousness is

itself shaped in terms of this exterior 'semiotic' (meaning-based) architecture, as well as more ineffable states of the human mind – those that operate at the liminal and subliminal levels. Thus, while consciousness refers to knowledge and meanings which can be explicated and articulated in some form of language and text, the liminal and subliminal levels of human cognition generally cannot. There are many words used to describe this 'pre-lingual' dimension of the human mind – intuition, the sub-conscious, the 'unconscious', sensations, emotions, spirit, imagination, 'gut feeling' and so on. While this dimension of culture, meaning-making and knowing will be discussed in later chapters, the concept of 'imagining' is offered here as a way of describing the *confluence* of consciousness, the liminal and subliminal levels of human cognition and meaning-making.

At this point of the discussion, it is also worth noting that these meanings, and indeed audiences themselves, are engaged in complex processes of social and political organization, which in the contemporary capitalist-economic context are generally hierarchical. Thus, different groups have greater and lesser access to the resources of text construction and distribution. To this end, a particular group's preferred meanings may be privileged over others. Quite obviously, major media corporations like the Fox Network have the power to create and distribute their version of the world (e.g. the Iraq War) more than smaller companies, community broadcasters or individuals. Particular meanings, therefore, may carry the interests and ideologies of dominant social and economic groups.

Thus, the death of one woman, Princess Diana, has carried an extraordinary density of meanings because it appears consonant with the interests and ideologies of dominant social elites *and* the broader cultural values of vast numbers of 'ordinary' people. Similarly, the reporting of 9/11 was largely shaped by the perspective of the US administration and meanings that are deeply embedded in American culture; these meanings were privileged over alternative meanings, such as the criticisms of American foreign policy and economic exploitation of the Middle East.

- *Culture*, therefore, is constructed out of consonant and aggregating meanings that are shaped in relation to a given social group's values, ethics, interests and ideologies. Culture may become evident in the material text (speech, image, sound, words) and in practices (human actions, audience behaviours, and so on). However, as we have also said, culture is also dynamic and replete with disputes over meaning and various claims for meaning primacy. New meanings are shaped in terms of the ceaseless interaction of humans and their diverse communicational forms. As we will discuss below, this dynamic contributes to the transfer, implosion, creation and re-creation of meaning.
- *Governments* and government regulations are a significant sub-category of culture, since they are able to exert considerable influence over the regulatory environment in which the media operate. For example, the expansion in global corporate media

during the 1980s and 1990s was facilitated by the deregulation of the US media industry, allowing corporations to grow exponentially and absorb larger markets.

The contemporary cultural setting, which blends mediated with politically inscribed meanings, needs to be understood as a new public sphere. Historically, the modern European nation-state was constructed around an ideal of free expression and the participation of citizens in government. This free expression took place in the public sphere – initially the public square and other public forums, and eventually through the medium of print. Mass societies have now come to rely on the electronic broadcast media as the centrifugal force of democracy. This new public sphere can be regarded as the *mediasphere* – a critical ‘culturescape’ in which meanings flow through various channels of human and technologically enhanced modes of communication (Lewis, 2005; Lewis and Lewis, 2006). The mediasphere is the compound of the media and the public sphere, the conflux of macro and micro processes of communication and social engagement.

Global Capital, Cultural Value and the New Televisual Reality

The ‘media’, therefore, is best understood as a set of dynamic communicative and culturally constituted relationships, rather than simply as a particular industry or conglomerate of corporate organizations. While they are not the same thing, mediation is embedded in culture and culture is embedded in mediation. This more inclusive conception of the media is clearly critical for our understanding of contemporary, televisual culture and its various permutations across modernizing and globalizing human societies. Most recent social theorists, in fact, recognize that communication and culture are central contingencies in the current phase of globalization, noting that the new transnational economy has been largely constructed around the instantaneous transfer of information (see Castells, 1997; Sklair, 2002; Roseman, 2003; Urry, 2003; Nairn and James, 2005). Most commentators also agree that this compression of time and space constitutes a new historical epoch of ‘contiguous distance’ by which the immediate transfer of finance, news or entertainment can draw people from their distant cultural and physical spaces into the virtual world of mediation – and its distinctive culture of televisualization. Thus, while capitalism has always carried its products across spatial and cultural borders, the new economy concentrates *value* into forms that can be instantaneously transacted across vast distances in an instant.

Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 1984, 1990; see also Baudrillard, 1981) argues that the foundation for this new form of symbolic exchange was established around the beginning of the twentieth century. According to Bourdieu, the meanings and social values attached to capitalist products transmogrified, as the basic needs of modern societies were largely satisfied. As Karl Marx had noted, capitalism depended for its survival on constant and unconstrained growth: that is, the capacity to invent new products to meet new

markets and new demand. With the need for basic food, clothing and housing satisfied by the early twentieth century, capitalism became reincarnated as 'consumer capitalism' whereby individuals and families became concentrated into the consuming 'household'. But this was not simply an economic or social reorganization. Media, culture and communications were at the centre of these transformations; from the 1920s until emergence of television, the wireless radio was the 'magical voice' of electricity and all the wonderful new products that a modern home could possess. Marketing, branding and advertising strategies contributed to the shaping of a new cultural and social consciousness which enabled communities, families and individuals to re-imagine themselves in terms of a new collective order, that is, as a 'society' that had a shared ideology and national trajectory. Thus, the communities that had been so severely strained and fragmented during the period of urbanization and industrialization were being re-welded through a sense of national belonging and the communal practice of capitalist consumerism. Pleasure, therefore, became the solder which bound political ideology to a new sense of community and shared culture.

To this end, capitalist products not only supported the economic sustainability of the developed societies; they also provided for society a new fabric of values and meanings, a *raison d'être* (reason for being) which gave direction and focus for the new consuming household. In a highly competitive and hierarchical society, where the distribution of wealth is often unjustly meted, it is largely this ideal and aspiration of pleasure that enables the overall system to sustain itself. According to Bourdieu, elite social groups have become particularly adept at 'reading' the values and meanings that are inscribed over particular capitalist products and practices. Thus, the products themselves are not politically neutral since their consumption reinforces the distinctions that are implied in the capitalist production process.

The concept of 'taste' becomes a rubric for social distinctions that are constituted around income, education, social refinement and class. In this way, a consumer or group of consumers will shape their own consciousness and identity around the ascribed value of particular products and services. At its simplest level, an individual distinguishes him/herself by driving a BMW to work, while another rides a Vespa. More subtly, an individual purchases department store clothing in the hope that it will pass as expensive designer wear. The social background of another individual is exposed when the etiquette of dining and utensil use is transgressed.

Of course, there has always been a level of symbolic value attached to products, but these were constrained by the limited incomes and purchasing power of the majority of the population. The continued expansion of the middle class and the proliferation of consumable products in developed societies stimulated an exponential growth in symbolic exchange value. From the early part of the twentieth century the household became increasingly populated by furniture, fashion, decor, trinkets, cutlery, washing products and a vast array of comfort products that enhanced the lifestyle of the new bourgeoisie. Different social groups actually came to recognize one another through the

exercise of product preference and the presentation of their 'style'. A number of cultural commentators have suggested that the expression of style is not simply about power differentials, but about differentiation or fragmentation more generally: thus, different social groups or 'sub-cultures' adopt a particular style of dress or consumption practice in order to identify themselves within the great morass of contemporary society (Stuart, 1984; Muggleton, 2002).

Jean Baudrillard (esp. 1981, 1984a) is somewhat critical of Bourdieu's reading of symbols and social distinction, arguing that contemporary sign systems cannot be so simply correlated with forms of social power. For Baudrillard, the symbolic force of a BMW is created less through the discrimination of consumption and class, and more through its ability to 'arouse' consumers. Beginning from a very different theoretical base from Bourdieu, Baudrillard argues that contemporary culture is a deluge of signs, symbols and images. These 'signs' are proliferating through the volumes of media and informational processes that now distinguish and create contemporary culture. Yet while other theorists believe that these signs are conduits of meaning, Baudrillard regards the meanings themselves as vacuous because there is no social agreement about their value and durability. In this sense, they are merely simulacra or imitations of imitations which dissolve before they are even comprehended by media audiences. The Princess Di phenomenon, the killings at Columbine High School, the sexual adventures of Paris Hilton are all constituted through a new, televisual culture – a new reality or hyperreality. This hyperreality creates new forms of stimulation, new forms of arousal and demand, new forms of erratic consumption. The product becomes intensely exalted and sexualized, often through the deployment of a young female body – but this arousal is a simulation and can never be satisfied. The consumer is prompted to act and consume; however, the deluge of images and signs is unending and the urge to consume is never consummated, never quite complete.

In Baudrillard's terms, therefore, the sign overtakes the product as the primary source of arousal, action and economy. Because it is nothing more than a sign, a powerfully sexualized sign, the consumer can never escape its abstraction. The proliferation of signs continues to stimulate. The BMW is sexually imaged and motivates some form of consumption – if not the car, then something else. The arousal prompts the desire to buy, but ultimately, there is nothing there. The sign is empty, leading merely to another sign, another amorphous arousal, another vacuous avatar.

For Baudrillard, contemporary culture is marked by this absence of material reality. Everything is mediated, and in Baudrillard's extreme view this means that everything is an imitation of an imitation – a simulacrum. In these terms, it is possible for Baudrillard (1995) to contend very seriously that 'the Gulf War did not take place' because the whole event was pre-prepared for televisual consumption, pre-digested and presupposed in its outcomes.

Fredric Jameson (1990, 1991) suggests, however, that this new culture is evinced through a deeper logic by which the news media are constantly reconstituting themselves

in the condition of 'the perpetually new'. The electronic media and the proliferation of signs and symbols actually reduce human value and human culture by compressing time and space. According to Jameson, contemporary culture has 'finally transcended the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself, to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually, and cognitively to map its position in a mappable external world' (1990: 85). The news media, that is, function to concentrate time and information in particular ways that separate us from the past, constituting all knowledge as an historical amnesia. Mediated culture, in this sense, is both a phantasm and a condition of severe loss. Our sense of presence in the culture and in meaning-making has been seriously compromised by the proliferating omnipresence of the media and information systems.

While many analysts of contemporary culture share Jameson's critical concerns, others treat the proliferation of signs and images more optimistically. Richard Dyer (1985), John Fiske (1987, 1989b), David Muggleton (2002) and Henry Jenkins (1992; Jenkins et al., 2002), for example, have seen significant connections between the production of popular media texts, and the cognitive and sensual satisfactions of audiences. 'Celebrity', in particular, is identified as the communal link that reconciles consumption capitalism with the everyday practices and pleasures of individuals within mass, contemporary society. For these authors, and many others impressed by the social and personal potential of popular media, the rendering of human experience in images and information is not to be feared, but to be explored, enjoyed and used by the people who integrate these texts into their own lifeworlds and imaginations. This perspective has become particularly prevalent in studies of the Internet and virtual cultures.

Globalization and a Politics of Contemporary Culture

We have established that contemporary culture is shaped in relation to pre-eminent forms of televisual and globally networked media. We have also recognized that the meanings and meaning-making processes which determine, and are determined by, culture are always formed in relation to audiences and their everyday lifeworlds and social practices. Of course, meanings are also shaped in relation to other significant communicational nodes, including other media (print, aural), social institutions (government, law, education, family), friendship and community groups, and the imaginary of an individual's personal history. All of these interactions take place within a more generalized and collective history, in which particular memories are privileged and preserved in text, and are thus available for the meaning-making of the present (de Certeau, 1988).

Many recent studies in the social sciences have been particularly interested in the cultural and economic transformations associated with globalization processes and the new communications technologies. The primacy of the image as a communicative mode has been central to these transformations, most particularly through the global networking

of media systems. The German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1952, 1977) referred to the arrival of the moving picture and the grand proportions of the cinema image as historically transformational: in the 'world as picture', the image becomes 'gigantic', overwhelming humans by its deceptive scale and presentation of the appearance of something which is actually absent.

While Heidegger did not live to see the full force of media globalization, it is clear that he recognized that the image spectacle would contribute significantly to the transformation of human consciousness – and that this change would filter back through all levels of human social experience. Heidegger feared that this new consciousness would veer human thinking away from deeper contemplation and the written word, thus depriving humans of their rational capacity to determine right from wrong. This mesmeric fascination with the image and (American) individualism would ultimately distract humans from the pursuit of freedom of thought, replacing it with a specious pursuit of freedom of (consumer) choice. The Marxist cultural theorist Theodor Adorno (1994) fortified these views, claiming that consumerism and popular culture transformed the individual into a pseudo or false individual who would slavishly follow fashion and the dictates of the powerful culture industries. Adorno was especially concerned about popular music and the power of melodrama to control and constrain human creativity.

Robert McChesney (2004), among many other recent writers, has claimed that media globalization has generally reduced the capacity of individuals to access the media, thus limiting diversity of views and consolidating elite ideologies across the globe. This is a particularly acute problem for English-speaking communities, since American media corporations dominate the global markets. In the context of the 9/11 attacks on New York and the global 'war on terror', Noam Chomsky (2001, 2003a, 2003b) argues that the corporate media and US government have simply asserted their interests and elite ideology over the citizens of the US and indeed the whole of the world. Similarly, Douglas Kellner (2005) claims that the combination of global power and the predominance of the media spectacle have debased democracy and the capacity of citizens to exercise clear political choices.

While there is some truth in these claims, they only partly explain the role of the global networked media in shaping global culture and the new media spaces (Lewis, 2005). The media is not simply motivated by the desire to dominate political spaces; it is driven by its own internal deficiencies and deficits –

Each media pronouncement or text is shaped through a deferral narrative in which the meaning of the story is linked in perpetuity to its supplement – the next news bulletin, episode, CD release, film, PR campaign or advertisement. Each new discourse or text is gestant, that is, with its own arrival and departure, and with the gestational connection to past and future texts. This system of connectedness creates a fiscal and semiotic debt which can only be redeemed through the exigency of the next installment, the next great event, the next epiphanal spectacle. In order to support

this semiotic exigency, media organizations within the industrial complex must invest in new technologies, strategies, productions and personnel. Everything must be the newest and the latest: ratings, market data, advertising contracts, licences, boards of directors, shareholders, parliamentary hearings, audiences, and creditors – all contribute to a sense of informational volition for media professionals. This ‘imperative for information’ drives journalists and editors, with an accelerating momentum, toward an ever greater level of production and productivity in an increasingly vigorous and contested semiotic and financial environment. (Lewis, 2005: 35)

In the context of increasing global insecurity, this situation has led many cultural analysts to conclude that the global networked media is the political affiliate of other dominant (hegemonic) organizations. In particular, authors like McChesney, Kellner and Chomsky equate the volume and prevalence of global media with a form of cultural imperialism. These views accord with globalization theories which identify western-US economic and military domination with a new kind of world order within which culture is becoming increasingly homogenized (see Chapter 10). The global corporate media works with the US-based political hegemony to ensure the spread of western interests through the ideology and practices of ‘free-market’, capitalist economics. Thus, the meanings and products that are generated through the new form of capitalism outlined above are supported by a dominant ideology – which itself is distributed through western-based signs and symbols.

While the ubiquity of US-based cultural products is clearly evident, this standardization argument has nevertheless been widely challenged. As we have already noted, the tendency toward the greater agglomeration of people and culture into a single economic and social/political order has created a range of effects. And indeed, globalization theorists such as Arjun Appadurai (1990, 1996, 2006), David Held (Held et al., 1999) and John Urry (2003) have maintained that the move to greater economic and cultural consolidation has necessarily involved countermoves toward local transformations and forms of social fragmentation. Roland Robertson refers to these counterflows in global and local effects as ‘glocalization’: the process by which local communities and cultures absorb and transform the globalizing elements of culture and economy. Manuel Castells (1997) has investigated these changes in terms of a reverse process of identity reformation, a process by which local communities adapt their sense of self in terms of global trends and local history.

Within this framework, globalization and the global culture are returned to the level of ‘ordinary’ people and their everyday lives. Some theorists refer to this process of re-absorption and adaptation of cultural products and their inscribed meanings as a form of ‘hybridization’. That is, the corporate media and other powerful groups generate their products, ideologies and texts across the globe; these materials and meanings are ‘consumed’ by different local communities but their inscribed values and meanings are changed *in relation to* the interests, history, values, institutions, beliefs, identities and practices of the local people. These groups then produce their own meanings and texts out of the hybrid of cultural elements. Perhaps the most spectacular example of this is the

AQ: Please check Appadurai 1996 is missing in the ref list.



Plate 1.1 *The Global Disaster as Global (Dis)unity*

On December 24, 2004, a massive earthquake on the northern tip of Sumatra, Indonesia, generated a tsunami event which wreaked incredible death and devastation across the region. While over 200,000 people were killed in Indonesia itself, many tens of thousands more fatalities were recorded in Thailand, southern India and Sri Lanka. Like other natural disasters—disease, hurricanes, floods—the impact of a tsunami is critically linked to the human conditions in which it occurs. Unlike the Pacific, which is rimmed by developed world economies and technology, the Indian Ocean had no tsunami warning system, or effective protection devices for coastal communities. The photograph above was taken six months after the tsunami struck a small fishing village, Arugambay, on the eastern coast of Sri Lanka. The concrete wells are filled with sand, appearing like gravestones for the once-thriving communities that occupied the shoreline.

While international aid organizations swept into the areas to support the recovery, their presence created as much harm as good. Complex ethnic, cultural and political conditions were destabilized, as the three main community groups – Tamil, Muslim, Sinhalese— competed for aid and recovery resources. The Muslim community, in particular, felt alienated by the majority Sinhalese government and aid agencies from the US, which was regarded as anti-Muslim in its war on terror. Tamils felt equally aggrieved, viewing themselves as victims of the government's ongoing civil war against the separatist Tamil Tigers. When the government constructed a Buddhist temple in the middle of the

Bollywood phenomenon which has adapted Hollywood movie styles, production systems, technologies and financial models into Indian expressive forms. Thus, the Indian movie industry has been constructed through the hybridization of western cinema and local customs, narrative styles and preferred modes of entertainment. Now the biggest movie industry in the world, the Bollywood system is being mimicked and adapted by various smaller countries and cultures which are re-hybridizing the form to suit their own, local conditions and forms of cultural practice.

CASE STUDY 1: Defining Di

It must already be clear that this assemblage of cultural discourses and imaginings can never be reduced to a single and all-embracing 'grand narrative' (Lyotard, 1984a). Indeed, one of the significant points of agreement amongst recent cultural theorists is that contemporary culture is multi-forming, divergent and constantly in dispute. 'Language wars' are formed, that is, not only in actual military or physical conflicts, but through all conditions of meaning-making and culture. The celebrity status of Princess Diana serves to illustrate this point, even though, on the surface, the Diana funeral appears to be one of the most unifying experiences in human history. The life and death of Diana Spencer need to be understood as a series of calamitous and struggling discourses which engage with an enormous number of people's pleasures and pains. Diana's funeral established a new horizon of global media consumption and cultural participation across the globe: around 2–3 billion people watched the memorial service, and the Elton John tribute song remains the highest selling music single ever produced. Even in the decade or so since her death, the imaginary of the 'people's princess' continues to stimulate the production of books, videos, websites, news stories and charity activities across the world. *The Queen* (Stephen Fraser, 2006) is the most recent example of the continued force of the Diana mythology for the popular imaginary.

Plate 1.1 (Continued)

township to give hope to the victims of the tsunami, a community war erupted with each of the ethnic groups accusing the other of corruption and banditry.

Thus, when the terrible devastation of the tsunami was reported across the globe, the news generated unparalleled sympathy and donations from the developed world. However, in a tragic reverberation of globalization, the combination of natural disaster and transnational interventions seems to have deepened the horror. Globalization might be bringing peoples and cultures closer together, but this new contiguity is exacerbating complex tensions and instabilities: the world remains critically divided, even in the midst of increasing communication and information distribution.

The person of Diana – whoever that might have been – is represented or constructed through the mass media and through general public discourses that interact with media texts (Davies, 1999). Her clothes, her hair, her palace, her title, her ‘image’, her sex, her relationships – all are representations or texts in as much as we attach meaning to them in our everyday practices and communicative encounters. And while this is true for each of us and has always been the defining feature of culture, the Princess Diana phenomenon illustrates the particular capacity of contemporary culture to construct and radiate meanings even through the vacuum of personal knowing. That is to say, our society and culture can function as a mass of accumulated parts because mediated knowing has been able to replace immediate or personal knowing of the other members of that huge communal formation (modern society). Though we know relatively few members of that mass group personally, we are nevertheless able to imagine and identify with a culture or community of other humans because of the mass media, their images, narratives and information. We didn’t know Diana personally, but we developed a personal knowing and an emotional engagement through the operations of the media.

The position of the celebrity is therefore fundamentally paradoxical (see Marshall, 1997; Turner, 2004; Jaffe, 2005). Diana is ‘of the people’ and yet prominent among us. She is constructed by our own capacity for meaning-making and yet delivered to us through the dissemination power of the mass media. Whoever-she-is must respond to what we think and feel she is, and yet we contribute significantly to the discourses that surround, attach themselves to, and produce her. The Diana we know and respond to becomes implicated in our own life experiences; she is not ‘out there’ as a distinctive, singular and objective fact. Rather, Diana is known only as she is ‘mediated’ through the texts and discourses that produce her. Thus, she becomes one of us, a living being in the fold of our own relationships, loves, fears, and homes.

Let us consider this in more detail. At the simplest level, of course, Diana Spencer came to represent charm, spontaneity and glamour for the popular imagination (Drew, 1998). This regal beauty hearkens to a range of already existing texts, images and imaginings that have been drawn through the fairytale and popular texts of childhood and beyond. Jacques Derrida (see 1979, 1981) calls this linking of texts and the accumulating of interdependent meanings ‘intertextuality’. Thus, our sense of Diana is built around other texts and textual experiences, some of which we might regard as adapted mythologies: narratives that are so frequently repeated that they become embedded in our belief systems or taken-for-granted truths and ideologies. The mass media also rely on, and textually appropriate (borrow from), these textual experiences to enrich, enliven and emotionally inscribe their own particular stories of Diana and her life (see Richards et al., 1999).

The ‘celebration’ and celebrity-making of Diana can only be understood in terms of these other texts and the propensity of a consumer capitalist culture to

commodify people as media products. As John Taylor (2000) argues, Diana's appeal is certainly driven by the imaging of regal grace, beauty and charity, though inevitably this commodification implicates certain political and ideological considerations. Specifically, the image is self-legitimizing: it confirms its own value and right to give pleasure to its audiences as indeed it confirms the validity of capitalism, capitalist institutions and its media, and the status and substance of the royal heritage itself. John Hartley (1996) has argued that the very idea of a constitutional monarchy continues to be legitimated through the popular media's continual re-presentation of the royal family: 'The "tabloid" and "gossip" media's obsession with the royal gonads is at the cutting edge, as it were, of political journalism in this context' (Hartley, 1996: 12). The image and the institutions that support it are entirely self-interested, driven by an ideology that is predicated on production, consumption, power and profit. Politics and ideology, that is, are necessarily implicated in the construction of the Diana character in the same way as they are implicated in the celebrity creation of movie and popular music stars.

However, and as Hartley himself goes on to ponder, the ideological context of the culture is itself formidably ambiguous. The Diana image is delivered to us by a plutocratic institution which might well have vested interests in the maintenance of elite power formations – celebrity sells, creating wealth, legitimacy and status for the media owners who create 'fame'. Even so, we need to recognize that it is the interests and consumption practices of ordinary people that actually determine the 'success' of those constructed images. The people ultimately select the image for their own everyday purposes and pleasures. Diana's privilege and power within the culture are sanctioned and permitted, that is, by the interests of her audience – her media subjects (Turnock, 2000).

But even this does not explain the incredible popularity and durability of the image in life and in death. As we examine it more closely, the Diana character was constructed through a remarkable range of competing signs and symbols. Yes, she was charming, gracious and beautiful, and ultimately these qualities were able to evolve into more mature narratives of maternity, abandonment and profound feminine integrity. But equally, Diana's political presence seemed strangely reconciling. The iniquities of inherited privilege and despotic rule are neutralized through the popular imaginings and presentation of Diana's more charitable and democratic demeanour. Those tiaras and dresses that might have radically distanced Diana from her consuming public became relativized – symbols of her charity, her work for the poor and impoverished of the world. As befitting the mythologies of benevolent authority, Diana's charity was both a demonstration of popular and community participation and a validation of her right to prominence and privilege. This 'charitable' demeanour was able to camouflage, it would seem, the social privilege which facilitated the sale in 1997 of one of Diana's dresses for over \$200,000 (a silk gown Diana wore when dancing with John Travolta at the White House).

Diana's celebrity, therefore, was intensely political, although the direction and exercise of that 'power' remain invisible or at least evasive. In the clamouring of grief that followed her death, there seemed no space at all for criticism or negative review. The opulent lifestyle and the inebriant circumstances of the accident were largely ignored by the serious and popular press, though had the same fate befallen socially ascribed villains – criminals, blacks, poor single mothers – the treatment of the issue would have been entirely different. In Diana's case the paparazzi, those voracious and marauding media hyenas, provided an effective focus for public blame – the paparazzi refused to comply with Diana's highly managed image manufacture. The public seemed strangely to forget that the paparazzi and the official press were merely the conduits for its own rabid consumption of the Diana narratives.

Indeed, one of the most telling features of Diana's celebrity was the ongoing battle for control of her image and representation. While the Diana celebrity had an immense capacity to increase audience ratings and circulation figures, control of the image was more extensively waged between different commercial, ethical and institutional interests. This 'struggle to signify', as Stuart Hall calls it, was most intensely manifest in the aftermath of Diana's death when the official Diana media machine was railing against the tabloid press, which was in turn railing against the paparazzi. For their part, the paparazzi, or unofficial celebrity press, represented themselves as the defenders of 'free speech' and editorial independence; they told the true stories because they were not constrained by Diana's public relations machinery. It was the paparazzi who released 'unofficial' photographs of Diana's life for the intrigue and pleasures of the general public. The paparazzi fed the rabid and salacious interests of Diana's public, contributing to her fame and her celebrity mystique.

These internal media ructions seemed peculiarly subdued during the period immediately following Diana's death. As Mick Hume (1998) has pointed out, the petty ethical squabbling turned to a general mood of embarrassment, if not shame. The Diana consumers articulated their grief through blame of others. The media culture that pursued all in order to make it available for the sensate pleasures of the consumer was suddenly under scrutiny. The media were blamed for Diana's death and an ethical truce was called as the assembly of televisual global citizens watched the regal coffin as it was charioted through the streets to Westminster. The media had gone too far and brought about her death, but at least they were available for our own personal grieving.

What is clear, then, is that our ability to make sense of the world we live in is now absolutely dependent on our relationship with the media. It is not that we are 'conditioned' by the various information and entertainment media, but rather that we are a part of them since our knowledge of ourselves and our world is filtered through their images and language. It may well be that the increasing abstractness of the world actually elicits an equally strong, though contradictory and unconscious, desire for moral and ideological substance – a 'grounded' reality that is not so

evanescent, ephemeral and contingent. The mythology of Diana, her regality and substantive links with the deep past, represent a way of imagining the world as a 'community' of subjects or citizens. The Diana narrative, that is, may well provide for people that sense of community and social consensus which contemporary culture, for all its pleasures, plenitude and possibilities, has rendered more abstract, if not elusive.

CULTURE AND CULTURAL STUDIES

A Definition of Culture

As noted, much recent commentary distinguishes contemporary culture in terms of the global communications systems and the compression of time and space. The formation of celebrity is one dimension of these new historical conditions; in rendering the familiar exceptional and the exceptional familiar, celebrity and televisual culture more generally contribute to the creation of an impression of global community. However, as we have also indicated, these impressions are accompanied by an equally forceful politics of hierarchy and differentiation – a sense in which the *notion* of global community and global culture are merely propagated by powerful elites who have most to benefit from the illusion of an integrated and homogenous social order. In either case, culture exists within the meaning-making of individuals and groups through the relationships formed in communication. The mediasphere brings text-producer-audience into a dynamic relationship that forms and is informed by culture (including political culture). We can thus define culture in the following terms –

Culture is an assemblage of imaginings and meanings that are generated by a given social group. These meanings may be consonant, disjunctive, overlapping, contentious, continuous or discontinuous. The given social group may be formed around a broad gradient of human communities, activities and purposes. Communication is the central force which binds social groups to culture; in contemporary culture these communicational processes are dominated by various modes of global networked media.

We can look at each of these definitional attributes in greater detail:

- 1 *Culture is an assemblage of imaginings and meanings.* I have already suggested that culture is constructed around collective and individual human consciousness. The term 'consciousness' generally refers to that mode of human thinking which is self-aware and shaped in relation to social experiences and social knowledge. Clearly, an individual's consciousness is shaped around the dominant values, beliefs and significant 'knowledge' of the social group. But also the individual's own 'mind' and personal history filters these experiences to form a distinctive, individual consciousness. The inventor of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, claimed that this

latter process is further complicated by the human 'sub-conscious', which operates at a subliminal level beyond the direct awareness of individuals.

Meaning-making is thus a very complicated set of processes. As noted earlier in the chapter, the concept of 'imagining' is applied in order to capture the conscious, liminal and subliminal mental operations which are mobilised by individuals and groups as they create meaning. The term does not refer exclusively to those zones of human creativity (imagination) which may be opposed to the faculty of 'reason'. Rather, 'imagining' refers to the forming power of mind, sensibilities, emotions and experience as they become the embryo of knowledge and its articulation in language. This 'experience' may be delivered by the mass media, as we have suggested, or other significant institutions such as the government, law, education or the family. Experience may also be that broad raft of interactions and activities which constitute an individual's everyday experience. The 'knowledge' which is the kernel of meaning, therefore, may be articulated as attitudes, beliefs, values, opinions, ideas, identity, art and even actions – all of which constitute 'expressivity' (Deleuze and Guatarri, 1987) and a 'readable' cultural text.

And just as the meanings of a text may change over time, so too can an individual's imagining of him/herself and the external world. Because imagining may be rational, irrational, creative and emotional – it is the ferment and site of change and the re-ordering of self. The 'imaginary' is the locale of an individual's complex engagement with the culture, with one's own aesthetic and creative re-processing of change, confusion and illumination. Thus, we can entirely re-configure or re-imagine our relationship with another human being: for example, a former lover toward whom we have become indifferent or even hostile. The concept of imagining might also help to explain the reconstruction of our individual identities through different social and temporal contexts: for example, through the experiences of migration or education. It explains how an industrial, working-class slum can be re-configured and re-imagined as a trendy, inner-city lifestyle. The physical space may be only moderately changed, but the cultural imagining is radically altered.

We are thus extending the definition of culture well beyond the notion of 'way of life', which has evolved in anthropological studies (see Chapter 2). Even so, social practices, beliefs, rituals and artefacts are all meaningful and hence part of the general definition.

- 2 *These imaginings and meanings may be consonant, disjunctive, overlapping, contentious, continuous or discontinuous.* As we shall see, language and meaning systems have often been treated as solid and fixed formations. However, meaning systems like language are capable of producing misunderstandings and non-meaning, as well as meanings. At any one time, a culture can be subject to an infinite array of meaning disputes and gaps. There may be 'dominant' meanings, values and ideologies that seek to determine a particular social order; however, a culture can never be entirely closed since it is made up of competing interests and many different individuals (subjects) and groups. Even relatively isolated tribal communities were comprised of different age groups and gender, and engaged in various forms of external interaction. Modern societies are extraordinarily complex, mixed and heterogeneous,

rendering them vulnerable to an infinite array of external and internal disputes of meaning.

- 3 *The given social group may be formed around a broad gradient of human communities, activities and purposes.* As we have already noted, culture and society are not the same thing, though they are clearly contingencies of one another. Individuals belong to various forms of social groupings, each with their own 'cultures'. This means that we can speak of a family culture, a national culture, an ethnic culture, a global culture, a work culture, a religious culture, a university culture, a football culture, a technological culture, a gay culture, and so on. A number of these cultures are attached to major social institutions which can assert considerable influence over its constituency. Nation and national culture, for example, have proved both durable and powerful, creating conditions in which individuals will surrender their lives in their defence.

All cultures, macro and micro, operate through particular discourses, rules, belief systems, values, rituals and practices that are imbued with meaning. Part of this meaning-making involves the construction of an individual's personal identity (or 'subjectivity') through the internalization and re-projection of attributes that are specific to that particular culture. In a complex, modern society where an individual may participate in a range of different social groupings and hence cultures, identity formation may produce contradictory effects. Thus, an individual may encounter more and less contention between various cultural affiliations and sources of identity construction. Ravers, for example, may love their nation but transgress nationally constituted drugs laws. The young Muslim men who perpetrated the attacks on the London underground (2005) were second generation immigrants and were clearly torn between an affiliation with the laws and values of nation and democracy, and the *jihadi* values which condone murder as retribution for Britain's invasion and occupation of Iraq.

Box 1.1 Reading the veil: A contemporary cultural analysis

In 2004 the French parliament passed legislation banning the wearing of all religious icons in all public schools. The law was greeted with considerable consternation by many of France's six million Muslims, as well as numerous civil rights groups. While the ban was placed on all religious iconography, it was generally recognized that the Muslim headscarf or *hijab* was the primary target of the new law. In the midst of global agitation around Islamist militantism, the war on terror and the calamitous US-based occupation of Iraq, the new French law created distinctly polemical responses. On the one side, many people saw it as a reassertion of modernist, democratic principles, most particularly the

(Continued)

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(Continued)

separation of 'church and state'. On the other hand, it was seen as the over-assertion of western secularism, and the transgression of the religious and civil rights of France's Muslim community.

Other pluralist western nations seemed somewhat dismayed by the French government's anxieties about domestic Islamism, preferring to manage Muslim communities through the general ambit of religious freedom and anti-discrimination processes, rather than a generalized process of control or prohibition. French sensitivity to the 'excessive' expression of religion, it was assumed, derived from the deep history of religious politicism which led to the exclusion of the Catholic Church from state affairs. The rupture of the French Revolution (1789–99), in particular, continues to affect contemporary French cultural and political life.

Protests about the laws in France were truncated, however, by the kidnap of two French journalists, who had been covering the Iraq War and occupation. While France was not part of the occupying forces, the Iraqi kidnappers used the two journalists as hostages, demanding that France repeal its religious icon laws. While the journalists were eventually released unharmed and the laws remain in place, similar controversies have arisen in the UK following the Islamic militant attacks on the London underground in 2005. As in the US after 9/11 and Australia after the Bali bombings, the 7/7 underground attacks in the UK stimulated some profound hostilities toward Muslim communities and Islam more generally. Since the underground attacks, the Muslim veil has been frequently identified as antagonistic to the values of democracy and public 'transparency'. The former British Home Secretary, Jack Straw, refused to meet with any person who 'covered her face', and novelist Salman Rushdie reportedly described the veil as 'shit'.

These sorts of views have been fortified by a number of 'modern' Islamic women who regard the veil and the burqa as an abomination which oppresses women. Other members of the Islamic community, including those who describe themselves as Muslim feminists, regard the burqa as a legitimate expression of femininity which liberates women from the male gaze and social judgements based on sexual attractiveness. Thus, while many in the west regard the burqa and veil as oppressive, many Islamic women see their traditional mode of dress as an expression of freedom and personal agency.

- 4 *Communication is the central force which binds social groups to culture; in contemporary culture these communicational processes are dominated by various modes of global networked media. As we have discussed earlier, the electronic media intensified particular cultural trends and processes during the twentieth century. The particular characteristics of electronic communication have rendered the conditions of cultural dispute, dissonance, instability and transition even more acute. Previously distant human cultural formations have been brought into greater propinquity, creating the circumstances for a proliferation of cultural discourses. These proliferating discourses*

stimulate ever-increasing possibilities for new meanings and new non-meanings or communication gaps.

For example, as the media products of the United States penetrate non-Anglo/European cultures, there is a remarkable proliferation of new discourses and disputes. In the period since World War II (1939–45), American films have introduced the discourse of romantic love and mouth kissing to cultures which had only deployed it as a marginal or fetishistic practice. The meaning of mouth kissing and the sexual mores associated with its deployment have been widely contested in countries like Japan, Korea and Indonesia. In Indonesia, especially, the cultural transitions that are accompanying globalization and the prevalence of western cultural styles and products are causing considerable consternation among more conservative community leaders. These leaders are sponsoring a new 'anti-pornography' law which is designed to ban publications like *Indonesia Playboy*, as well as gay and transvestite sexual practices and public kissing. Ironically, the invocation of traditional moral values against gay and transvestite practices seems to ignore or override Indonesia's long history of tolerance and social recognition of these practices. Thus, it is not the practices themselves which appear to be the problem, but the new globalizing cultural context in which they are represented as 'modern' or 'western'.

Postmodern Culture_www.the.postmodern.turn.com

The concepts of 'the postmodern', 'postmodernity' and 'postmodernism' have become widely used in various forms of social and cultural analysis over recent decades. While an entire chapter of this book has been devoted to this topic, it is worth noting immediately that these terms are not used consistently and many commentators, in fact, reject them altogether (see Habermas, 1984b; Kellner, 1995; McGuigan, 1997). Even so, it is critical for all students of cultural studies to understand these terms and their application for the analysis of contemporary culture. Thus, since the 1980s, numerous commentators across a range of disciplines have characterized the cultural changes we have been describing above as 'the postmodern turn': that is, as a new historical epoch which can be distinguished from the previous, 'modern' period. The differences between the two can be summarized as in Table 1.1.

There are several things to be said about this typology –

- 1 A number of cultural commentators reject the claim that we have moved into an entirely new historical phase, arguing that the current epoch is just another permutation of modernism. For these commentators, contemporary culture has become increasingly global, free-market, 'mediated', 'networked' and complex. But these characteristics are essentially 'modern', extensions of the cultural, political and socio-economic institutions that have been forged over the past several centuries. These commentators are usually most interested in the structures of power that have been constructed around various forms of western, capitalist societies. While they

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Table 1.1 *The Modern/The Postmodern*

The modern	The postmodern
Enlightenment	Post-Enlightenment
Logic-centred	Image/media
Scientific method	Chaos/Quantum
Absolute truth	Relativism
Humanism/liberalism	Cultural specificity
Homogeneous	Heterogeneous
Europe-centred	Global/multicultural
Universal laws	Deconstruction
Social structure	Individual pleasure
Industrialism	Post-industrialism
Materialism	Symbolism
Atoms	Information
Patriarchy	Sexual fluidity
High art	Popular media
Chronology	Time/space compression
Broadcast	Multiple creators
Reality	Simulation
Conclusion	Inconclusive/language play

might accept that culture is changing, these commentators view the various cultural elements outlined in Table 1.1 as continuous, rather than oppositional.

- 2 A number of politically conservative scholars reject the whole notion of an epochal change, regarding the elements in Table 1.1 as a dangerous bi-product of social and aesthetic radicalism. Many of these scholars argue that postmodernist ideas (relativism in particular) are socially threatening and should be rejected. Unlike their left-liberal counterparts, however, they do not accept the need for a new social, economic or political system.
- 3 Some commentators accept the notion of a 'global postmodern' (see Hall, 1991a, 1991b), but seek to apply a critique of culture that is essentially modern. That is, they critique the elements on the right-hand side of the table (the global postmodern) using the elements on the left-hand side (modern logic and political strategies). Fredric Jameson (1991, 1998), most notably, established a critique of postmodern consciousness which clearly derives from a commitment to a neo-Marxist tradition.
- 4 Some commentators welcome the new historical epoch and its potential for emancipation from modernist social structures and the limitations of its critique (see Jencks, 1987b, 1995; Hutcheon, 1988; Giddens, 1994; Duvall and Dworking, 2001). Thus, rather than replace the oppressive institutions of modernism with a different set of potentially oppressive institutions, the postmodernists advocate a new form of individualism and free expressivity (Deleuze and Guatarri, 1987). The right-hand side of the table replaces the left-hand side, creating new conditions for the exploration of personal autonomy and alternative values.

- 5 For many scholars, this new critique is the province of new disciplines such as 'cultural studies'. Even if it is no longer specified, many scholars and students working in cultural studies are adopting a postmodern perspective, one which celebrates cross-disciplinary models, creative thinking, diversity, and relativism. Many scholars now simply accept that these attributes are a genuine and well-recognized dimension of the cultural landscape, whether it is tagged 'postmodern' or not.

Each of these positions has a place in the study of contemporary culture, as each has its particular insights and value. As we have already noted, the disputes between these various perspectives centre largely on definitions of power, the strategy of critique and respective conceptions of 'value', 'structure' 'aesthetics' and 'ideology'. Disputes around the analytical efficacy of the term 'postmodernism' in many ways cloak broader disciplinary contentions over the meaning of 'culture' itself, and its significance relative to other analytical foci such as society and social institutions, politics, policy and materialism. The general strategy of this book is to give voice to these relative claims in order to illuminate the various ways in which culture and meaning-making have been examined and formed through the broad lineage of cultural analysis, theory and cultural studies. Through these broadly evolved insights into the *concept* of culture, the processing and operations of contemporary 'culture' will be revealed. That is, the concepts become a lens through which students and scholars may view the world within which they are so entirely and intimately immersed.

Of course, the analysis offered in this book is neither politically nor heuristically neutral. One of the lessons of cultural studies is that language is always formed in terms of a specific political space: that is, it is *positioned* in accordance with the analyst's own views, modes of reading and expressivity. This book, in other words, is simply one other cultural utterance, one other cultural text. My voice, like yours, is subject to the same complexion of power, meaning-making and dispute, as any other text. To this end, I have already privileged particular perspectives and models, and as we proceed, my preference for the complexities of meaning-making and resistant agonisms will become increasingly revealed.

Even so, the general aim of this book is to present cultural studies in its broadest terms, acknowledging the significant contribution of alternative modes of cultural analysis. To this end, this book rejects the dichotomous approach to cultural studies that has evolved since the 1980s (see Chapters 3 and 12). To some extent, this dichotomy is related to the concept of postmodernism, with particular schools of thought embracing the concept with others rejecting it. But more broadly the dichotomy can be summarized in the following terms –

- 1 A number of scholars believe that the material conditions of life determine the semiotic (meaning-making) and cultural dimensions. Culture is to be studied as an outcome of social structures, institutions and government policies. These scholars have usually been trained in Marxist and liberal politics, and sociology.



Plate 1.2 *The 2006 World Cup Football, Germany*



Plate 1.3 *Cremation ritual on Nusa Lembongan*

Culture is formed around specific social groups – their customs, beliefs, practices, values and predominant modes of meaning-making. The 2006 World Cup Football (soccer) event based in Germany brought around 3.5 billion people into a single, televisual community. While this community was ephemeral and shaped by an extraordinarily tenuous media imagining, it was nevertheless a clear manifestation of a constituent, global culture. For all their immense internal diversity, this televisual community shared significant values, practices, rules, norms and meanings through their experience of the World Cup text. Plate 1.3 presents a far more localized ritual event. This cremation was witnessed by most of the 150 community members on the small Indonesian island of Nusa Lembongan. Cremation ceremonies of this kind are linked to older Vedic-Hindu practices, which were once dominant across South and South East Asia, pre-dating the arrival of Islam around the tenth century.

Thus, while the World Cup is clearly a global event constituted around an evolving global culture, the highly localized cremation on Nusa Lembongan has also been shaped by historically resonant ‘global’ rituals. In the contemporary context, such ceremonies contribute to the maintenance of local ‘traditions’ and culture, even as they are being absorbed into the televisual practices (like photography) of international visitors. Thus, like the World Cup, these customary practices are now the subject of a new form of globalization – international tourism.

- 2 A second group focuses on the aesthetics of text, meaning construction and text reading. Within this group is another division between those who focus more specifically on aesthetics, and those who focus on the political (cultural politics) of textual construction and consumption. The policy and materialism cultural scholars tend to see the focus on aesthetics as solipsistic, overly theoretical and impracticable. They are usually regarded as ‘postmodernists’ by the materialists.

The approach of this book is more inclusive and less divisive. To this end, the dichotomy itself appears largely unproductive since, as it is argued in Chapter 12, both sides of the polemic emphasize different dimensions of the cultural process, using variations of the same methodological framework. Thus, the book explores the various genealogies of cultural analysis, applying its own conceptual hybrid for the elucidation of contemporary culture in the latter chapters.

CASE STUDY 2: Terrorism: A Postmodern attack on America

The al-Qa’ida attacks on Washington and New York represent a pivotal moment in American and world history. I have argued at length (Lewis 2005) that these attacks not only created a void in the New York skyline, they also constituted a rupture in the meaning of ‘America’ – and in particular the American people’s faith in their nation’s global primacy and inviolability. In particular, the attacks challenged many of the assumptions that had been inscribed over American culture, identity and sense of historical destiny. Not surprisingly, the social status quo with most to lose from this

new vulnerability rushed forward in order to fill the void, to restore meaning to the condition and status of 'America'.

Journalists and politicians, in particular, invoked the discourses of 'nationalism', tradition and the 'deep past' – a common strategy in times of national crisis and instability. As we have outlined above, the aim of such strategies is to ground the modern state in a sense of 'origin' and purpose, thus providing a greater sense of durability and destiny. Thus, in order to truncate the possibility of fragmentation and the emergence of alternative (perhaps revolutionary) meanings, the US President, George W. Bush, sought to fill the semiotic void with a highly integrated and homogenizing ideology of nation, action, vengeance and destiny. In the speeches which followed the calamity, this ideology was concentrated in an Absolute Truth, a polemic which could in no way be challenged or repudiated, was formed around a mission of retribution. Operation Infinite Justice was the original title of this mission, and an 'infinite' justice, of course, is one that marshals the divine powers against evil. Bush called on such retribution in his hastily coined, but extraordinarily effective, 'war against terror'. The ritual of prayer and the interlacing of blessings on the nation, its people and its ideology constituted a new crusade, one which would restore the meaning of America and its divine destiny as 'the chosen' (Nairn and James, 2005). These views were fortified by the archetypal American journalist and novelist, Norman Mailer, who spoke for much of the media as he declared –

[T]he best explanation for 9/11 is that the Devil won a great battle that day. Yes, Satan as the pilot who guided those planes into that ungodly denouement ... Yes, as if part of the Devil's aesthetic acumen was to bring it off, exactly as if we were watching the same action movie we had been looking at for years. That may be at the core of the immense impact 9/11 had on America. Our movies came off the screen and chased us down the canyons of the city. (Mailer, 2003: 110–11)

Thus, the meaning of America, which had been articulated in its popular culture, comes 'off the screen' in a radical disjunction of what was, and what is. The glory and heroism of the movie screen would now be invoked as the solution to this rupture.

Within the context of such centralized and bedazzlingly potent political discourse, the voices of moderation, let alone dissent, were heavily muted. Susan Sontag (2001) queried the broad aesthetic by which American cultural politics constructs itself. The description of the perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks as 'cowardly' confounded Sontag. In essence, she argued, 9/11 was not an assault on 'liberty', 'civilization' or 'the free world', but was rather a response to America's own policies and actions in foreign territories. This perspective was also echoed in the *London Review of Books* special edition on September 11, where Mary Beard boldly suggested that 'however tactfully you dress it up, the United States had it coming'. These comments precipitated

a deluge of responses, most of which attacked Beard's perspective. One American academic from Stanford University, for example, was incensed by the lack of sensitivity expressed by the British journal, claiming that she rejected the idea that America was 'to blame' for the attacks and that she would cancel her longstanding subscription to the *LRB* as a matter of protest. An equally forceful response to criticisms of US foreign policy was directed against Bill Maher, the host of US TV show *Politically Incorrect*. Explicating a point made by guest Dimesh D'Souza, Maher suggested that 'Lobbing cruise missiles from two thousand miles away, that's cowardly'. Like Sontag, Maher was savaged by the media, the public and the White House. A major sponsor cancelled their contract and Maher was abandoned by his network; the program was cancelled several months later.

Thus, for many American journalists and social commentators the 9/11 attacks crystallized the nation's cultural status – its values, heritage and politics. Those who dared to criticize US foreign policy or ideological integrity in the midst of such an egregious assault, and such profound grief, were not simply insensitive: they were 'traitors'. To this end, many public commentators vilified those intellectuals who, like Sontag, had been captured by postmodernism and its facile moral relativism. Where the world was so clearly divided between good and evil, a postmodernist relativism seemed as impotent and impure as the terrorists themselves. Writing in the *New York Times*, Leonard Piekoff claimed that the greatest obstacle to US victory in the 'war against terror' was 'our own intellectuals, ... multiculturalists rejecting the concept of objectivity'. And in a similar vein, John Leo denounced the 'dangerous ideas' of 'radical cultural relativism ... and a postmodern conviction that there are no moral truths worth defending' (cited in Fish, 2002: 28).

In many respects, all of the comments cited above, along with the grand pronouncements of the US President himself (see Chapter 12), are based on some form of cultural analysis – and they are all formed around critical assumptions about the nature of American culture. Thus, they are all inscribed with a particular conceptual framework which defines the interests, perspectives and cultural politics of the speaker. Those that seek to impose an homogenised and absolute set of values and ideologies are, undoubtedly, inspired by a particular vision and meaning of 'America', one which privileges the US and the west in a more generalized 'clash of civilizations' (Huntington, 2002). As we discuss in Chapter 12, these privileged discourses form the basis of a new global cultural divide that now undermines the very basis of that privilege – a democratic social order. A significant role of cultural analysis, therefore, is to interrogate these assumptions and the basis of dominant discourse. The language wars that irradiate through global media networks expose themselves in the agonistic conditions of imposed and privileged order. The war on terror is, above all other things, a cultural trope which seeks to inscribe itself on the imaginings of all audience meaning-makers and their respective reading of this dynamic globalizing culture.

METHODOLOGIES AND METHODS

Our task in this book is to interrogate the various ways in which culture is formed, theorized and studied. An important part of this project is to present the most significant models of cultural studies analysis and methodologies. By ‘methodologies’ we mean the theoretical, epistemological (knowledge) and heuristic (discovery) context in which specific investigative techniques (methods) are applied. While some cultural studies practitioners use various combinations of these models, others tend to privilege specific techniques and methods of investigation (see McGuigan, 1997; Giles and Middleton, 1999; White and Schwoch, 2006). Cultural studies, in fact, is noteworthy among the humanities and social sciences for its deployment of diverse methodological designs. This ‘interdisciplinary’ approach to the study of culture brings together many of the intellectual and methodological traditions of the humanities (literature, media studies, history, aesthetics, philosophy) and the social sciences (sociology, anthropology, political science). While these different traditions have produced some quite passionate debates and disagreements about the ‘true mission’ of cultural studies, their confluence has also produced an extraordinarily productive and incisive body of work. These methodological models can be summarized in terms of theoretical analysis, critical investigation, deconstruction, textual studies, empirical studies and policy-based research.

Theoretical Analysis

Most cultural analysts use theory and conceptual frameworks in order to identify, clarify and speculate over specific cultural sites and issues. Some cultural theorists seek to establish the conceptual parameters within which cultural analysis should take place. They raise questions such as: What is culture? What is the appropriate focus of cultural studies? What is the relationship between power and culture? What role do the media play in constructing culture? How does representation – including the aesthetics of representation – contribute to the formation of cultural knowledge and the cultural episteme? Are social practices more or less important than textual analysis? These sorts of questions have already been raised in this chapter. In this sense, we can define theory as a form of conceptualization in language (see Milner, 2002; Lewis, 2002a).

Thus, a critical part of cultural studies is the formulation of ‘concepts’. A concept provides a lens through which to view cultural sites, practices and other theorizations. For example, Antonio Gramsci adapted the concept of ‘hegemony’ (lit. ‘leadership’) to describe the ways in which institutional elites in a society ‘negotiate’ their power with those whom they lead. This concept has become popular in cultural studies as it provides a useful mechanism for explaining the ways in which powerful groups interact with less powerful groups. For cultural studies scholars the concept of hegemony enables a description of various forms of organizational and social hierarchy without erasing the potential for

liberation across the broader community. The Gramscian concept, therefore, has been adapted and redeployed for a description of the relationship between media and their audiences.

Other cultural analysts (e.g., Hall, 1991a, 1991b) argue that theory is only a means to an end: it frames the questions which should then be directed toward specific research of specific texts, policies, social practices, institutions and relationships. In either case, theory is no more and no less than our way of knowing the world through its transformation into language. It takes us out of the quotidian immediacy of experience and allows us to see how various elements relate and intersect with one another. In other words, theory operates like a cognitive map. Our immersion in the world of action is relieved by theorization: by our capacity to step back and frame our contemplations in an orderly, established and systematic way.

Critical Investigation/Cultural Politics

As outlined earlier, cultural studies is embedded in questions of power and ideology. While 'ideology' has a number of definitions (see Chapter 3), we are speaking here about a systematic formulation of politically derived beliefs, values and discourses. These questions of power and ideology are articulated through symbolic forms of social practice, institutions and texts. As we noted above, different schools of cultural analysts privilege the material or 'corporeal' dimensions of politics over the symbolic – and vice versa. And some schools focus specifically on the ways in which discourses are engaged in policy formulation which impacts directly on the corporeal and material conditions of citizens. In all cases, these analyses incorporate an investigation of the meanings associated with political conditions.

In order to conduct these studies, cultural analysis has developed and deployed varied and extremely potent techniques, most particularly in terms of identifiable differentiations in economic, social and cultural power. In many areas, such as postcolonial/decolonization studies, queer studies and feminism, cultural studies has quite deliberately challenged particular regimes of power, particularly as they are expressed in discourse and texts. At their most polemical and overt, these critical studies begin from a specific oppositional position and 'criticize' the orthodoxies of dominant and oppressive ideologies. The early work of Raymond Williams and the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (see Chapter 4) focused very directly on an agenda of social and political reform.

More recently, critical cultural studies has focused on questions of liberation and identity. As we have noted, identity is formed around cultural experiences and facilitates some level of subjective choice in determining 'who I am'. This identity politics often examines the 'representation' of particular social groups in terms of a dominant ideology. This dominant ideology attempts to prescribe identity for the individual, which the analyst in turn seeks to overthrow. A feminist reading of the Diana story may, for example,

emphasize the political construction of female identity and the limits that are placed on Diana's (and other women's) subjectivity. Similarly, a postcolonial analysis of the current 'war on terror' would critique the US-dominated cultural construction of 'Islam'; according to the postcolonial critique, the 'west' constructs Muslim people as monolithic, belligerent and necessarily antithetical to freedom, democracy and western values.

As we have suggested, culture cannot be disengaged from its symbolization and imagining, nor can these imaginings be disengaged from the power relationships that form and inform them. To this extent, then, our interrogations of culture will regularly encounter questions of power, liberation and resistance. Power is ubiquitous, as Michel Foucault claims, and all power involves the struggle to signify, construct meanings and control language and mediation generally. Politics and power, therefore, are not simply contingencies of democratic processes or governance. Rather, power is fluid, pervasive and inevitably bound to all processes of meaning-making, dispute and dissolution. As we shall see throughout this book, questions of power and ideology arise at the moment of utterance, the moment of forming the imagination in discourse. Whether they concede it or not, all cultural theorists and analysts are engaged in the operations of language struggles and language war.

Deconstruction

The technique of deconstruction has become an important and distinctive part of the critical lexicon. Jacques Derrida (1974, 1979) pioneered the technique, applying it to the study of European philosophy. Basically, Derrida seeks to illuminate the historical and linguistic assumptions that underpin the formation and cultural status of certain dominant ideas. Derrida examines the 'construction' of these ideas by questioning their underlying legitimacy; once the social legitimacy is cast into doubt, then the idea begins to unravel or become 'deconstructed'. Derrida's strategy of deconstruction points specifically to the language structures and rhetorical techniques used in European philosophy. This rhetoric, Derrida argues, is based on forms of 'binary opposition' where two elements are juxtaposed in order to demonstrate the superiority of one over the other: for example, reason over unreason, civilization over nature, man over woman, West over East, speech over writing, and so on. Deconstruction seeks to dissolve these binary formations by showing that, since everything is a mere construction of language, neither of the binary opponents can exist without reference to the other. Both sides of the opposition are relative to one another so neither can be absolutely and everlastingly true: their 'truth' is only a claim against the other pole. As language unravels, so does truth.

Cultural studies practitioners have adapted Derrida's methods for a more general analysis of cultural phenomena. In particular, analysts have sought to expose and deconstruct the discourses (power and language) which inform particular texts, institutions and social practices. Edward Said (1993), for example, has demonstrated how the liberalist and

bourgeois morality that underpins nineteenth-century English literature was informed by imperialist, xenophobic and racist ideology. Similarly, the representation of Princess Diana confirms particular political and social attitudes, most particularly the legitimacy of capitalist hierarchy and the mediated artifice of feminine glamour. Deconstruction techniques can also be applied to less obviously polemical conditions such as the representation of specific racial groups in various forms of contemporary advertising. The deployment of a Japanese person in English-speaking advertisements, for example, is not necessarily Orientalist or overtly racist, but may configure a new kind of ethnic typology: it may represent innovation, digital expertise and organizational efficiency. Deconstruction seeks out the assumptions which lead to the formation of typologies in this kind of textualization.

Textual Studies

The study of texts (books, news, magazines, films, TV programmes, webpages and musical recordings) has emerged as a significant part of the humanities. Some traditional forms of textual analysis seek to illuminate the aesthetic qualities, moral values and immanent meanings held within a quality art or literary text (high art). By and large, contemporary cultural studies has dispensed with this methodology and the distinction between high and popular art which grounds it. Indeed, cultural studies has developed a particular technique of textual analysis, one which seeks to locate the text within its historical, material and cultural context. Thus, rather than consider meaning to be something inherent in the text or as something which elevates art over all other aspects of life, cultural studies has treated texts as cultural documents. These documents cannot be separated from the circumstances and conditions of their production and consumption. Thus, cultural texts are fundamentally and inescapably embedded in social practices, institutional processes, politics and economy. The meanings of texts cannot be treated as independent of the broader flows and operations of the culture in which the text exists.

As we have already noted, of course, this interconnectedness of text and context may be studied in many ways, and indeed the definition of what constitutes 'a text' is also quite variable. Some analysts seek to separate media texts from everyday practices and experiences. Others, like Roland Barthes (1975, 1977), claim that since everything is symbolic or meaningful, everything can be treated as text. For Michel Foucault (1974, 1977a, 1980), everything is mediated in terms of power relationships and so everything can be regarded as 'discourse' (language and power). In any case, the symbolic conditions of textuality remain a central and critical focus for cultural studies. For some analysts the text is a primary indicator of the context; for others the context presents insights into the text and its representations.

In cultural studies, popular media texts are as significant as the more complex and abstruse art forms. TV soap operas and commercials reflect important aspects of everyday

culture. Some forms of cultural inquiry concern themselves with the structure of textual narratives (story-telling), most particularly as these narratives reflect broader cultural patterns and processes of conflict resolution. This 'structuralist' or 'semiological' approach suggests that textual narratives are the aesthetic manifestation of deeply rooted cultural patterns: 'myths', for example, which are part of the essential patterning of a given culture (see Barthes, 1973; Fiske et al., 1987). More recent analysis has tended to move away from this approach, adopting a more open and fluid analysis of representation and culture. This approach may be critical or deconstructive, or it may be designed to elucidate the complex interrelationships that operate through culture. Our analysis of the Diana story constitutes a textual analysis which seeks to illuminate the complex nature of identity construction, textual representation and textual reception. It also reflects on the institutional processes that are engaged in the promotion of a celebrity.

Empirical Methods

Some cultural studies practitioners like to distinguish between 'empiricism' as a methodology, and the empirical methods it deploys. In this sense, empiricism is an epistemological (knowledge) framework by which the world can be described and measured in an objective form (facts-data). Empirical methods, however, may be viewed as strategies that can be used for the illumination of facts, *or* the illumination of the perspectives (multiple truths) generated in human interactions with each other and the world of phenomena (natural and human made objects). It is this latter approach which has become increasingly popular in cultural and media studies. The findings generated by these techniques are not treated as a universal truth, as in the natural sciences, but rather as part of a multi-forming picture. In this general sense, 'empirical' might be simply defined as 'experience'.

As early forms of social science became more interested in the symbolic dimensions of social experience, a range of empirical methods were developed and applied. In particular, anthropology and sociology became interested in recording the social and symbolic practices – that is, the 'way of life' – of specific social groups. This 'way of life' included all symbolic activities (including rituals and economic activities) and artefacts (e.g., implements, art objects, paintings), both of which carry significant meaning. The methods of 'ethnography' were devised in order to record and map the ways in which human groups participated in and constructed culture.

Sociological analysis applied various forms of ethnography to the study of so-called 'deviant sub-cultures' (e.g., biker gangs, drug users, naturists). While some of these studies involved direct immersion in the sub-culture (participant observation), they could also apply various forms of interview strategies and discussions called 'focus groups'. In work more directly articulated through cultural theory, Dick Hebdige (1979, 1988) adapted these methods for the study of youth culture and 'style' in the United Kingdom. Similarly,

some areas of audience studies have sought to elucidate the ways in which audiences 'consume' and use media texts in their everyday lives. This form of ethnography records ordinary people's practices and application of texts. Morley and Silverstone (1990), for example, have used empirical methods to show how audience/consumers use the technology of the TV in their normal, domestic lives. Video recordings, questionnaires and focus groups are all commonly used to study people and their relationship to texts within a given cultural context.

Ethnography of this kind tends to produce very descriptive or 'qualitative' data. This approach is achieving considerable popularity within cultural studies as it remains embedded in a notion of 'way of life'. Ien Ang's study of the audiences of *Dallas* (Ang, 1985) was not ethnographic, but nevertheless sought information about the experience of ordinary viewers. Some research, however, applies more rigorous quantitative or statistical methods to gather data. These sorts of studies use, for example, extensive survey techniques and statistical data gathered from TV ratings or from government bureaus. These sorts of research models have difficulty justifying their theoretical connection to cultural studies since they present such data in terms of objective truth. Cultural studies tends to treat reality and truth as forms of cultural construction: that is, the truth is only ever partial as it is shaped in the unstable and uncertain materials of language and culture.

Policy-based Studies

Policy-based studies have always been a part of cultural studies. Since the 1990s, however, particular schools of cultural studies have fixed their identity around a more focused style of cultural policy analysis, especially in terms of major technologies such as TV and digital communications (see Lewis and Miller, 2002). There may be many reasons for this more exclusive focus on policy, not the least of which is the propensity of governments to fund empirical and policy-directed social science. Policy research applies a range of strategies in order to elucidate the economic, social and cultural implications of some more or less specific cultural/media issue. For example, the public anguish over the death of Princess Diana prompted various governments to consider the question of individual privacy and the media. Cultural studies presented various perspectives on the issue of privacy and the popular media; cultural policy research asked whether some greater level of regulatory protection was required. Cultural policy studies have also examined issues such as the public funding of national film and television programmes, funding of public and community broadcasters, ownership of media corporations, and public ownership of telephone services. Issues of access, surveillance and censorship have also been regularly canvassed in policy-based cultural research.

Empirical and statistical methods, case studies and direct interviews are all common strategies in policy research. Close reading, textual analysis and deconstruction are less

common in research, which is often directed toward ‘reports’ and audiences outside the academy.

ADVANTAGES OF THE CULTURAL STUDIES APPROACH

As we have noted throughout this chapter, contemporary developed societies are characterized by the following:

- 1 *Increasing differentiation and diversity.* There are increasing levels of social, economic and cultural interaction between humans across the globe. Migration, workplace structures and practices, tourism, business travel, education exchange and global communications are creating more varied and less unitary social and cultural conditions. Individual human subjects live in increasingly complex circumstances where they are constantly exposed to alternative ways of living, acting and making meaning.
- 2 *Increasing consumerism.* Capitalism continues to mutate as it seeks out new and different products for new and different markets. The practices of consumption lead onward to problematics of newness, taste and fashion, sexualization, and environmental calamity.
- 3 *Increasing density of televisual product and modes of knowing.* The proliferation of the visual image has led to new problematics in thinking and experiencing the world. The culture is saturated with aural and visual images. Digitization and computer networking are contributing to the transformation of work and of information and entertainment-based practices. Subjects are exposed daily to multiplying modes of televisual stimulus.

As we have outlined in this chapter, the concept of culture provides an invaluable tool for the exposition and analysis of these characteristics and of the contemporary world more generally. Of course, our task of explaining and analysing culture is a formidable one: culture is a work in progress which is thoroughly implicated in all matters of human activity and thinking. Yet the magnitude of the task is commensurate with the rewards. Culture, as a diverse assemblage of meanings and meaning-making processes and practices, is an enthralling and extremely rewarding field of inquiry. This chapter has established the scope of our challenge; the remaining chapters in Part 1 will examine in more detail how culture came to be formed in various modes of analysis and theory.