

## Chapter 1

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# The idea of cultural studies

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Writing in 1983, Richard Johnson, a former director of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, revised the grammar in the title of his paper 'What Is Cultural Studies Anyway?' to read 'What *are* cultural studies anyway?' (p. 1). It is a significant shift. There are many ideas about what constitutes the centre of cultural studies. Seemingly, many of the arguments about the shape of the field and the appropriateness of specific practices within it are driven by the original disciplinary orientation of individual contributors. Thus, historians tend to be suspicious of the textual analysis practised by those who originally trained as literary critics; the literary critics in turn are often suspicious of the way in which sociologists or ethnographers accept statements from their subjects without sufficient analysis and interpretation. Recently, some sociologists have been broadly critical of humanities-based cultural studies research which overlooks the usefulness of political economy. It would be a mistake to see cultural studies as a new discipline, or even a discrete constellation of disciplines. Cultural studies is an interdisciplinary field where certain concerns and methods have converged; the usefulness of this convergence is that it has enabled us to understand phenomena and relationships that were not accessible through the existing disciplines. It is not, however, a unified field, and much of this book will be taken up with mapping lines of argument and division as well as of convergence.

All of that said, cultural studies *does* contain common elements: principles, motivations, preoccupations and theoretical categories. In this chapter, I will outline the most basic of these at an introductory level. I will return to develop them more fully in later chapters.

## LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

In Chapter 2, I will sketch out the beginnings of British cultural studies within English literary studies, looking at the contributions of Raymond Williams and Richard Hoggart in some detail. At this stage, only a couple of points need to be made about the way in which this tradition began.

Customarily, cultural studies is seen to begin with the publication of Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* (1958) and Raymond Williams' *Culture and Society 1780–1950* (1958) and *The Long Revolution* (1961). Both Hoggart and Williams can be placed within a tradition of English literary criticism generally identified with F. R. Leavis and noted for its concentration on the forms of literary texts and on their moral/social significance. What was impressive about both Hoggart and Williams was their ability to mobilize their methods of textual criticism so as to 'read' cultural forms other than literature: popular song, for instance, or popular fiction. But there were clear limits: both writers suffered from the lack of a method that could more appropriately analyse the ways in which such cultural forms and practices produced their *social*, not merely their aesthetic, meanings and pleasures. To reconnect the texts with society, with the culture and the individuals that produced and consumed them, involved a fundamental reorientation. One was required to think about how culture was structured as a *whole* before one could examine its processes or its constitutive parts.

As Iain Chambers (1986, 208) has suggested, 'Explanations based on the idea of totality, on the rational frame that connects the most distant and complex parts, are characteristic of the great Continental schools of thought': Marxism, classical sociology, psychoanalysis, structuralism, semiotics. The European influence on British cultural studies largely came, in the first instance at least, from structuralism. Structuralism has many variants, but its common characteristic is an interest in the systems, the sets of relationships, the formal structures that frame and enable the production of meaning. The original structuralist stimulus registered within British cultural studies was not, however, a theory of culture, but rather a theory of language. Within most of what follows, language looms as the most essential of concepts, either in its own right or through being appropriated as a model for understanding other cultural systems.

Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of language is our starting point.<sup>1</sup> Common-sense understandings of the function of language would see it as a system for naming things; seemingly, an object turns up in the material world, we apply a name to it and communicate this to others, and the word enters into usage. Saussure sees it differently. For him, language is a mechanism that determines how we decide what constitutes 'an object' in the first place, let alone which objects might need naming. Language does not name an already organized and coherent reality; its role is far more powerful and complex. The function of language is to organize, to construct, indeed to provide us with our only access to, reality.

This distinction might become clearer if we refer to Saussure's proposition that the connection between a word and its meaning is not inherent, or natural, but, in most instances, quite arbitrary; the word *tree* means what it does to us only because we agree to let it do so. The fact that there is no real reason *this* word should mean what it does is underlined by the fact that there are different words to express the same concept in different languages. Further, there is no 'natural' reason the concept itself should be expressed at all. There is no universal law that decrees we should distinguish between trees and, say, flowers, or between trees and grass; that we do so is a matter of convention. Australian Aboriginal cultures discern a multitude of differences among various conditions of what white Australian culture sees as empty desert; their language has many words differentiating what whites simply call 'bush' or 'scrub'. Even the way we 'see' the world is determined by the cultural conventions through which we conceptualize the images we receive. When the first colonists arrived in Australia, their early paintings of the indigenous peoples resembled current European aesthetic conventions of 'the noble savage'. They bore little resemblance to what we now see as the 'real' characteristics of Australian Aborigines. Those early painters represented what they saw through the *visual* 'languages' of their time. So, even our idea of the natural world is organized, constituted, through the conventions of its representation: through languages.

When Saussure insists that the relation between a word and its meaning is constructed, not given, he is directing us to the cultural and social dimensions of language. Language is cultural, not natural, and so the meanings it generates are too. The *way* in

which language generates meaning, according to Saussure, is important. Again, he insists that the function of language is not to fix intrinsic meanings, the *definitions* of those things it refers to, as we might imagine it should. Language is a system of relationships; it establishes categories and makes distinctions through networks of difference and similarity. When we think of the word *man*, we attribute meaning by specifying the concept's similarity to, or difference from, other concepts; crucially, we will consider what such a word tells us this object is *not*: not boy, not girl, not woman, and so on. Cultural relations are reproduced through the language system: to extend the previous example, the word *man* might also generate its meaning in opposition to other concepts – not weak, not emotional, not sensitive, for example – that go to build up a particular cultural definition of the male role within gender relations.

The insights contained within Saussure's theory of language have a relevance beyond linguistics because they reveal to us the mechanisms through which we make sense of our world. Specific social relations are defined through the place language allocates them within *its* system of relations. Such an explanation of language endows it with enormous determining power. Reality is made relative, while the power of constructing 'the real' is attributed to the mechanisms of language within the culture. Meaning is revealed to be culturally grounded – even culturally specific. Different cultures may not only use different language systems but they may also, in a definitive sense, inhabit different worlds. Culture, as the site where meaning is generated and experienced, becomes a determining, productive field through which social realities are constructed, experienced and interpreted.

The central mechanism through which language exercises its determining function is explained through the notions of *langue* and *parole*. Saussure divides the structure of a language system into two categories: *langue* is the full repertoire of possibilities within a language system – all the things that can be thought and said; *parole* refers to the specific utterance, composed by selection from the *langue*. Although *langue* is an enormous system, it is also a determining, limiting system in that it sets up specific sets of relations that are impossible for any one speaker alone to change (although, as we shall see, the system does contain the potential for change). Any utterance composed within the system

is also constrained by it, restricted to the categories it recognizes, the conventions it establishes. In speaking a language we find it immensely difficult not to reproduce its assumptions, its version of the world:

The individual absorbs language before he can think for himself: indeed the absorption of language is the very condition of being able to think for himself. The individual can reject particular knowledges that society explicitly teaches him, he can throw off particular beliefs that society forcibly imposes upon him – but he has always already accepted the words and meanings through which such knowledges and beliefs were communicated to him. . . . They lie within him like an undigested piece of society.

(Harland 1987, 12–13)

The great contribution of Saussure's theory is that it directly relates language and culture; some may say it works too well, making it difficult to separate them.

Saussure's next step is outside the specific domain of linguistics. He argues that the principles which structure the linguistic system can also be seen to organize other kinds of communication systems – not only writing, but also non-linguistic systems such as those governing images, gestures or the conventions of 'good manners', for instance. Saussure proposes an analogy between the operation of language and the operation of all other systems that generate meaning, seeing them all as 'signifying systems'. This analogy has been widely accepted and adopted. The reasons for its attraction are pretty clear. Language is a signifying system that can be seen to be closely ordered, structured, and thus can be rigorously examined and ultimately understood; conversely, it is also a means of 'expression' that is not entirely mechanistic in its functions but allows for a range of variant possibilities. Saussure's system thus acknowledges or recognizes the power of determining, controlling structures (analogous to *langue*), as well as the specific, partly 'free', individualized instance (analogous to *parole*). It offers enormous possibilities for the analysis of cultural systems that are not, strictly speaking, languages, but that work like languages. The structuralist anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss adopted Saussure's model to decode the myths, symbolic systems, even the customary practices employed in the preparation of food, of 'primitive' societies; and the French semioti-

cian Roland Barthes (1973) applied it to the analysis of the codes and conventions employed in the films, sports and eating habits (among other topics) of contemporary Western societies in *Mythologies*. For such followers, there was little doubt that 'culture . . . was itself a . . . *signifying* practice – and had its own determinate product: meaning' (Hall 1980a, 30).

## SEMIOTICS AND SIGNIFICATION

That cultural product – meaning – is of crucial importance. If the only way to understand the world is through its 'representation' to us through language(s), we need some method of dealing with representation, with the production of meaning. In his *A Course in General Linguistics* (1960), Saussure suggests the establishment of a 'science which would study the life of signs within society' (p. 16). Semiology 'would teach us what signs consist of, what laws govern them'. Semiology was to be the mechanism for applying the structural model of language across all signifying systems and for providing a method of analysis that would be 'scientific' and precise. While it is not entirely scientific, semiotics – as we shall call it here – has become a most useful method, the terminology of which is basic to cultural studies and needs to be outlined at least briefly in this section.

Semiotics allows us to examine the cultural specificity of representations and their meanings by using one set of methods and terms across the full range of signifying practices: gesture, dress, writing, speech, photography, film, television and so on. Central here is the idea of the sign. A sign can be thought of as the smallest unit of communication within a language system. It can be a word, a photograph, a sound, an image on a screen, a musical note, a gesture, an item of clothing. To be a sign it must have a physical form, it must refer to something other than itself, and it must be recognized as doing this by other users of the sign system. The word *tree* is a sign; the photographic image of Brad Pitt is a sign; the trademark of Coca-Cola is a sign, too. Less obviously, when we dress to go out for a drink, or to see a band play, our selection and combination of items of clothing is a combination of signs; our clothes are placed in relation to other signs (the way we do our hair, for instance) that have meaning for those we will meet there. We intend that these signs will determine our meaning for those we meet, and we fear that the

meanings we have attempted to create will not be the meanings taken: for instance, instead of being seen as a part of a particular social scene, we may be 'read' as *poseurs* or phonies. In this, as in other situations, we signify ourselves through the signs available to us within our culture; we select and combine them in relation to the codes and conventions established within our culture, in order to limit and determine the range of possible meanings they are likely to generate when read by others.

In order to understand the process of signification, the sign has been separated into its constituent parts: the signifier and the signified. It has become conventional to talk of the signifier as the physical form of the sign: the written word, the lines on the page that form the drawing, the photograph, the sound. The signified is the mental concept referred to by the signifier. So the word *tree* will not necessarily refer to a specific tree but to a culturally produced concept of 'treeness'. The meaning generated by these two components emerges from their relationship; one cannot separate them and still generate meaning. The relationship is, most often, an arbitrary and constructed one, and so it can change. The mental concept conventionally activated by the word *gay*, for instance, has shifted over the last decade or so, articulating an entirely new set of relations. The ways in which such a shift might occur are of crucial importance to cultural studies, because it is through such phenomena we can track cultural change.

We need to understand the social dimension of the sign: the ways in which culture supplies us with the signifier, the form, and the signified, the mental concept. A conventional system of classification is of some relevance here: the distinction between literal and associative meanings – or denotation and connotation. According to such a system, we have the literal (denotative) meaning of a word, such as *mugging*, and the wider social dimension (connotation), where the accretion of associations around the word extends and amplifies its literal meaning. Of course, *mugging* is not likely to produce utterly literal meanings, free of connotation; there is really only the theoretical possibility that such a thing as a connotation-free, or unsocialized, meaning might exist. Stuart Hall and a group from the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies have written a large book, devoted almost solely to the public understandings of this one word – *mugging* – in Britain, and the cultural and political means

through which those understandings were constructed (Hall *et al.* 1978).

Roland Barthes (1973) has, in effect, extended this system of classification into semiotics. In his essay 'Myth Today', he has outlined an incremental signifying system in which social meanings attach themselves to signs, just as connotations attach themselves to a word. This culturally enriched sign, itself, becomes the signifier for the next sign in a chain of signification of ascending complexity and cultural specificity. So, for example, the word *outlaw* has acquired social meanings that will be called up and that will acquire further and more specific accretions when used,



Figure 1.1 Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos (Reprinted with kind permission of John Fairfax and Sons.)

say, in a western film or in the lyrics of a song played by a heavy metal band. Similarly, the meanings Arnold Schwarzenegger has accrued in his *Terminator* films become part of what he signifies in subsequent performances. Barthes' particular concern in 'Myth Today' is with the way cultural associations and social knowledge attach themselves to signifieds. He calls these attachments 'myths', not meaning to suggest that they are necessarily untrue, but that they operate, as do myths in what we think of as more primitive societies, to 'explain' our world for us.

It is easier to demonstrate the function of semiotic methods in practice than to explain them in the abstract. The accompanying news photo (see figure 1.1) was taken on the last day of Ferdinand Marcos' presidency of the Philippines. It combines a number of signs: the figures of Marcos himself and that of his wife, Imelda, are the most important, but the microphone and balcony rails also combine to provide us with a context – probably the balcony of the presidential palace. At the time the photo was published, there may have been varied responses to it, particularly in the United States, where support for the Marcos regime was becoming politically embarrassing. Let us see what semiotics will tell us about this photo.

The image of Marcos is a signifier that immediately activates cultural knowledge about Marcos himself. The signified of Marcos is, presumably for most of us, highly charged: our 'reading' of it might include our assessment of his dictatorship, the allegations of corruption and extortion, and the contested history of his dealings with political opponents – in particular, Benigno Aquino. For most readers, the signified would be informed by what Barthes would call myths about the link between corruption and power, by explicitly political attitudes about US foreign policy, perhaps by a (not necessarily unified or noncontradictory) selection from the competing myths that 'explain' the Marcos persona, and possibly by racist notions of despotic Third World leaders drawing on the implicit assumptions of such popular fictions as *Mission Impossible* and *Romancing the Stone*. So, for Western readers, this photo will not have a neutral, purely denotative meaning; Marcos' cultural meanings are inevitably invoked as we recognize the signifier.

There are also other signifiers to notice here: Marcos' posture and gesture. We might recognize these generally as signifiers of defiance, of power or of political resistance; when combined with

the specific signifieds, the combination of gesture and posture is easily read as the sign of a futile, despotic thirst for power. When these signs are combined with those signifying Imelda Marcos, such a reading is reinforced. Facial expressions can be signifiers, too, and Imelda looks anxious. The arrangement of the signs – the images of Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos – within the frame is also important. The relation between them is such that her anxiety, while subordinated in the composition, undermines the power of his resistant and defiant gesture. The photo's compositional construction of an interplay between man and wife, between dictator and consort, domesticates the moment somewhat by turning a major political event into an individualized family drama. Here myths connecting men, power and the secondary role played by their women are offered as an almost irresistible invitation to interpret the contrast between her expression and his. It is a rich and ambiguous photo, and thus a wonderfully appropriate choice for a newspaper to use at such a juncture; with Marcos liable to fall at any time, this picture could be used to signify the futility of his attempt to retain power, or the determination with which he was managing to hang on. The headline and caption in the newspaper when it appeared would partly determine which set of meanings readers would most likely construct.

If we turn to another example, the practices of advertising provide a clear demonstration of the processes of signification. Advertising could be said to work by fitting a signifier to a signified, both cooperating with and intervening in the semiotic process. Advertisers typically deploy a signifier, already conventionally related to a mental concept they wish to attach to their product as a means of providing their product with that meaning. So, the manufacturers of Ski yoghurt in Australia run a series of television ads featuring a particular life-style: sailboarding, hang-gliding, surfing, skiing. The arrangement of signifiers within the images places great emphasis on the natural environment in which these activities take place: water, snow, air. There is no obvious connection with yoghurt, but the life-style shots are intercut with shots of the product being consumed by the same suntanned young things who were sailboarding. The process of semiosis means that we stitch the signs together, connecting the yoghurt with the life-style depicted. It is similar to the process of metaphor in writing or speech, in which two otherwise unconnected ideas

are syntactically linked and thus bleed into each other; each takes on some of the meanings of the other.

The result, for Ski yoghurt, is the product's incorporation into an idea of the natural, into the existing myths of youth, and of a healthy outdoor life-style. As a consequence of advertising like this, yoghurt is now a 'life-style product' as much as a food; this campaign emphasizes the product's place within a set of social, subcultural, fashionable, life-style relations more than it emphasizes Ski's taste as a food – its place within a culinary (if still fashionable) set of relations. Finally, the ads are informed by a myth that links youth, health and nature, as if youth were not only more healthy and vigorous but also more 'natural' than other physical states. This operates in tandem with the apparently unshakeable myth that certain aspects of one's physical appearance are the key to all other states of well-being, from employment to love to personal happiness and success. Such myths may seem transparently false, but they do have surprising explanatory force. Television programmes such as *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous* reinforce such myths by knitting fame, financial success and glamour together in every segment. To see the successful as exceptionally gifted, and implicitly to see oneself as ordinary and therefore in need of the signifiers of success that life-style products might provide, is to accept the mythic explanation offered for an inequitable and discriminatory economic and social structure.

These last comments foreshadow the next of the common elements within British cultural studies, its political objectives. But before we leave semiotics, it is important to reemphasize its usefulness as a methodology. At the most elementary level it supplies us with a terminology and a conceptual frame that enables the analysis of non-linguistic signs. For this reason alone, semiotics has become part of the vocabulary of cultural studies. The method is widely deployed in the analysis of film and television. Clearly, its value lies in its ability to deal with sound, image and their interrelation. In television studies, particularly, semiotics' break with an aesthetic mode of analysis and its relative independence from notions of authorial intention are valuable. There is a link, however, between aesthetic analysis and semiotic analysis: the strategy of calling the object or site of one's analysis *a text*. The term is appropriated from literary studies and depends upon an analogy between the close analysis conventionally applied to literary texts and the close analysis cultural studies

applies to popular cultural texts. The objectives of cultural studies' analyses of texts may differ markedly, however, from those of predominantly evaluative modes of literary studies, such as the tradition associated with F. R. Leavis in Britain. While many individual or groups of cultural texts may be particularly interesting to us – the Madonna video for 'Like a Prayer', for instance, or David Lynch's TV series, *Twin Peaks* – the point of textual analysis is not to set up a canon of rich and rewarding texts we can return to as privileged objects. Structuralist influence on the application of semiotics to popular cultural texts has insisted that analysis should not limit itself to the structures of individual texts, but should use such texts as the site for examining the wider structures that produced them – those of the culture itself. As Richard Johnson (1983) has emphasized, while textual analysis is, as we shall see, a major current within cultural studies, the text is still 'only a *means* in cultural study'; it is 'no longer studied for its own sake . . . but rather for the subjective or cultural forms which it realises and makes available' (p. 35).<sup>2</sup>

Johnson has been sceptical of the value of textual analysis, and arguments around the practice will be taken up in Chapter 3 in greater detail, but he is right to stress the importance of the text as a site where cultural meanings are accessible to us, rather than as a privileged object of study in its own right. The precise nature of cultural studies' interest in these meanings is important, too; at its most distinctive, cultural studies analysis is aimed towards a particular end – that of understanding the ways in which power relations are regulated, distributed and deployed within industrial societies. This introduces the next topic, and I approach it by acknowledging the philosophical and political roots of British cultural studies in British Marxism.

## MARXISM AND IDEOLOGY

British Marxist thought underwent radical transformations during the 1960s. When Raymond Williams published *Culture and Society* in 1958, he was able to scoff at English Marxist critics as essentially irrelevant to any wider community of ideas. This attitude was increasingly inappropriate as the 1960s developed and the influence of European Marxist thought provoked a break with traditional Marxism and an embracing of what has been

called a 'complex' or a 'critical' Marxism (see Bennett 1981, 7; Hall 1980a, 25).

Stereotyped representations of Marxist thought conventionalize it as a monolithic and revolutionary body of theory. This European tradition is neither of these things; its standard discourse is the critique, and it spends as much time dealing with issues and divisions *within* the field as outside it. The influence of such European theorists as Lukács, Benjamin, Goldmann and Sartre was extended through English translations of their work in the mid-1960s, affecting a large range of academic disciplines and political formations. Crucial, for cultural studies, was the way in which this tradition reframed the place and function of culture:

The Marxism which informs the cultural studies approach is a *critical* Marxism in the sense that it has contested the reductionist implications of earlier Marxist approaches to the study of culture. These, especially in Britain, often tended to view culture – whether we mean this in the sense of works of art or literature, or the ways of life of particular social classes – as being totally determined by economic relationships. The Marxist approaches that have informed the development of the cultural studies perspective, by contrast, have insisted on the 'relative autonomy' of culture – on the fact that it is not simply dependent on economic relationships and cannot, accordingly, be reduced to or viewed as a mere reflection of these, and that it actively influences and has consequences for economic and political relationships rather than simply being passively influenced by them.

(Bennett 1981, 7)

Traditional Marxism had devalued the importance of the idea of culture; culture was part of the 'superstructure' of society, and thus simply a product of the economic and industrial base. Yet, as Saussure's account of the social function of language suggests, this ignores the way in which language exercises a determining influence over the 'real' – including the material bases of capitalism. Historians, too, have argued against such a view as too simple an account of history and its formation. Cultural studies employed critical Marxist theory to launch attacks on the 'economism' in previous explanations of how existing power relations have been instituted and legitimated. Drawing in particular on Louis Althusser's (1971) argument that key 'ideological' apparatuses (the law,

the family, the education system, for instance) are every bit as significant as economic conditions, cultural studies insisted that culture is neither simply dependent on nor simply independent of economic relationships. Rather, as Althusser argues, there are many determining forces – economic, political *and* cultural – competing and conflicting with each other in order to make up the complex unity of society.

Marx's aphorism that 'men make their own history, but not in conditions of their own making' has become an often-repeated dictum in this field. The problem of *how* the conditions in which we make our own history are determined is a central one for Marxist and for cultural studies theory. Althusser's answer is to argue for a network of determinations, differently articulated at different points and for different people, that exercises an over-seeing, or 'overdetermining', control over social experience. The mechanism through which the process of overdetermination works is that of ideology.

Ideology, in earlier Marxist formulations, had been seen as a kind of veil over the eyes of the working class, the filter that screened out or disguised their 'real' relations to the world around them. The function of ideology was to construct a 'false consciousness' of the self and of one's relation to history. Althusser's work marks a conclusive break with this way of conceptualizing the term. Just as Saussure had argued that language provides us with access to a *version* of reality, rather than to *the* reality, Althusser's definition sees ideology not as false but as a conceptual framework 'through which men interpret, make sense of, experience and "live" the material conditions in which they find themselves' (Hall 1980a, 33). Ideology forms and shapes our consciousness of reality. For good or ill, the world it constructs is the one we will always inhabit.

Clearly, ideology must saturate language. The formation of the categories through which we understand experience, as mentioned above in the quotation from Harland (1987), begins before we can resist them. The language system, with its constitutive ideological frameworks, is always already there waiting for the child to insert him- or herself into it. This is why feminists have been so critical of sexist language – the ways in which ideologies of domination are institutionalized through the use of *Miss*, *Mrs*, or the assumption that every committee must have a 'chairman'. Althusser also insists that ideologies must be examined not only

in language and representation, but also in their material forms – the institutions and social practices through which we organize and live our lives. John Fiske (1987a) explains how Althusser's ideological state apparatuses (the media, the legal system, the educational system and the political system) achieve ideological ends by establishing and legitimating social norms:

These norms are realized in the day-to-day workings of the ideological state apparatuses. Each one of these institutions is 'relatively autonomous', and there are no overt connections between it and any of the others – the legal system is not explicitly connected to the school system or to the media, for example – yet they all perform similar ideological work. They are all patriarchal; they are all concerned with the getting and keeping of wealth and possessions, and they all assert individualism and competition between individuals.

(p. 257)

Since ideologies are observable in material form only in the practices, behaviours, institutions and texts in society, the need to examine these material forms seemed to be extremely pressing. There is now a rich literature of inquiry into the material, social and historical conditions of ideological formations. These range from histories of the media to the histories of discourse identified with Michel Foucault, histories of the notion of discipline or of Western sexuality, for instance, that see such concepts as entirely culturally produced.<sup>3</sup> However, within British cultural studies, the primary focus of ideological analysis has been on the media, in particular, on their definitions of social relations and political problems, and on their implication in the production and transformation of popular ideologies (Hall 1980a, 117). This has been a central concern for the Birmingham Centre.

These critical Marxist accounts of ideology insist on culture's determination by specific historical forces, legitimated by specific ideological formations, and in specific material interests. There is nothing natural or inevitable about their view of history. Althusserian Marxism does not stop there, however. Ideology not only produces our culture, it also produces our consciousness of our selves. Another essential category moves into our sights now – the category of the unique individual, possessed of innate, intrinsic qualities expressed and realized in the idea of the self. This



category, this romantic idea of the individual, is the next target of cultural studies theory.

### INDIVIDUALISM AND SUBJECTIVITY

Marxism has always seen the notion of individualism as a central supporting mythology for capitalism; the placement of the individual at the centre of history has thus been vigorously resisted. Althusser's and, later, Jacques Lacan's critiques of individualism, however, are significantly different from those that preceded them.

Althusser argues that ideology operates not explicitly but implicitly; it lives in those practices, those structures, those images we take for granted. We internalize ideology and thus are not easily made conscious of its presence or its effects; it is unconscious. And yet, the unconscious has, within many philosophical frameworks, been seen as the core of our individuality, a product of our nature. If Althusser is right, then, our unconscious, too, is formed in ideology, from *outside* our 'essential' selves. For Althusser, the notion of an essential self disappears as a fiction, an impossibility, and in its place is the social being who possesses a socially produced sense of identity – a 'subjectivity'. This subjectivity is not like the old unified individual self; it can be contradictory, and it can change within different situations and in response to different kinds of address. We rely, in fact, on language and ideology to instruct us in how we are to conceive our social identities, in how to be a 'subject'.

The post-Freudian psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan takes this notion further. Lacan appropriates the model of structural linguistics from Saussure, and argues that our unconscious is a sign system, too, that functions like a language. (Dreams, for instance, offer an example of this.) The *langue* of our unconscious is not produced by a unique individual, but by culture. Just as we learn to speak in the language and customs of our culture, and are thus in a sense constructed through them, our unconscious too is formed through the perceptions and language of others. Our view of ourselves is composed from a repertoire given to us, not produced by us, and so we are the subjects, not the authors, of cultural processes.

Dizzying as this can seem when first encountered, such perspectives have been extraordinarily productive. For instance, consider

how such a view of the individual/subject might have affected the first feminist critiques of the social construction of the feminine. Alibis against accusations of sexual discrimination customarily invoke the problems inherent in 'natural' female attributes: women are not given managerial jobs because they are not 'risk takers', or they tend to get too 'emotionally involved'. Their consignment to the home and family is justified because these are seen as their 'natural' place, and this is reinforced by their 'natural' interests in children, sewing, homemaking and so on. Even women who might have to admit to such interests, or such personal attributes, could now argue that there is nothing natural about them: they are socially produced. What to do about this is a little more difficult; women cannot be granted an exemption from cultural processes, but they can interrogate their function so that women's subordination no longer has the alibi of being 'natural'. For recent feminist theorists, post-Freudian notions of subjectivity have been widely used to examine the social construction of the feminine and to frame attempts to intervene in that social process.

More widely, the notion of subjectivity has provoked studies into the construction of subjectivities by and within specific historical movements. Media studies and screen theory have looked at the way the medium, and in many cases a particular text, constructs a specific range of subjectivities for the reader or viewer. There is a rich controversy around this work, particularly that published in *Screen* magazine, but it has been useful in underlining the fact that we respond to the invitation of a text by inhabiting a designated or constructed subjectivity. This subjectivity may well be quite different from what we construct for ourselves in reading other texts. Socially produced subjectivities do not need to be consistent (Morley 1986, 42).<sup>4</sup> David Morley's research on people's use of television found that viewers could adopt internally contradictory positions in response, say, to particular items within one television news programme, inhabiting a range of competing and apparently inconsistent subjectivities. Nor would a viewer's response to a television news programme be framed solely by that programme; clearly, a range of social, economic and cultural forces will 'over-determine' the way in which the viewer sees him- or herself as the subject of that programme's address.

This foreshadows an area that will be followed up in Chapter 3 – the degree to which texts construct the subjectivities

of their audiences. Morley's work is opposed to that of the majority of the *Screen* critics in insisting that the reader is a social, as well as a textual, subject: that is, the text is not the only or even the major mechanism producing the reader's subjectivity – even while he or she is reading the text.

### TEXTS, CONTEXTS AND DISCOURSES

As will have become plain by now, cultural studies is a complicated field in which the role of theory is crucial. The problem of conceptualizing the social relations that make up our popular cultures defeats small-scale empirical analyses. One really does have to develop some overarching theoretical position that can organize one's practice coherently. However, the complexity of the field has meant that while all the variant approaches share a view of culture as a political, historical process, constructing everyday life, their specific approaches and their chosen subject matter can look very different.

Current work in cultural studies includes histories of popular movements, particularly in the Britain of the nineteenth century, that focus on subcultures and the gaps in official histories; Lacanian studies of subjectivities, particularly the construction of feminine subjectivities in particular contexts and through particular media; 'ethnographic' studies of subcultures within contemporary urban societies, attempting to analyse the subcultures' interpretations of their own cultural experiences; the analysis of specific media, such as television, in an attempt to understand the structure of their 'languages', and their relation to ideologies; the analysis of particular textual forms – from popular fiction to music video – in order to pin down their formal and ideological characteristics; studies of media economy, drawing on the major traditions of the 1960s and 1970s in Britain, and tracking the production of culture through media institutions and government cultural policy; a combination of textual analysis and ethnographic audience studies that attempt to find out how, primarily, television audiences use the medium; and the continuing enterprise of theoretical clarification of the whole field of study. This is not an exhaustive list, but it at least suggests the breadth and depth of the field.

To see that such diverse activities belong to the same broad enterprise is not easy, but it is important to recognize that despite

this variety of topics and perspectives, the object inspected is the same: culture. The methodologies I have outlined – structuralism and semiotics in particular – and the central terms I have glossed – signification, representation, texts, subjectivity, ideology – are applied throughout the field, too. Nevertheless, it was customary for quite some time to perceive cultural studies as split by a broad methodological and theoretical division between structuralists and 'culturalists'.

The structuralism/culturalism split will occupy us again later, but for the moment it is worth outlining as a debate. Structuralists saw culture as the primary object of study, and approached it most often by way of the analysis of representative textual forms. The forms and structures that produced cultural meanings were the centre of their attention, and so they tended to be less interested in the culturally specific, the historical or the differences between forms than they were in tracking overarching characteristics and similarities. 'Culturalists', and British historians in particular, resisted structuralism; it was too deterministic, too comprehensive a definition of the force of ideology. Identified particularly with Raymond Williams and E. P. Thompson, culturalism retained a stronger sense of the power of human agency against history and ideology; that is, culturalists argued that determining forces could be resisted, and that history could be affected by radical individual effort. The focus of their work was resolutely parochial – on the 'peculiarities of the English'. Where structuralism took on a particularly European, even 'foreign' image, culturalism seemed to be the homegrown, British alternative.<sup>5</sup>

This structuralism/culturalism split always was a little too neat: it delimited as well as divided the field. It is now a much less applicable distinction, anyway, as Tony Bennett has argued in his introduction to *Popular Culture and Social Relations* (Bennett *et al.* 1986). Since the interest in the work of Italian theorist Antonio Gramsci, the split no longer occupies as important a place as it once did. Gramsci's theories of hegemony will be explored further in later chapters, but suffice to say here that he resolves a number of problems seen to hamper the application of Althusser's theory of ideology. Most important, Gramsci offers a less mechanistic notion of determination, and of the domination of a ruling class. Where Althusser's explanation implies that cultural change is almost impossible and ideological struggle futile, Gramsci

explains how change is built into the system. He acknowledges the power of the individual human agent within culture by analysing not only the overdetermining structure that produces the individual, but also the range of possibilities produced for the individual. Finally, Gramsci's work is historicized, addressing the construction of cultural power at specific historical moments.

In practical terms, the differences between the major tendencies in cultural studies have revealed themselves in the ways through which individual authors have approached their subject matter. Here, too, we can see two broad, if not always mutually exclusive, categories of approach: one either works through a set of textual formations from which one begins to read constitutive cultural codes or one examines the political, historical, economic or social context in which texts were produced and thus tracks the codes from the culture into the text. These days, neither approach is as discrete as once was the case, but the early days of textual analysis did tend to see texts out of context, to ignore their placement within a specific historical juncture, while contextual studies tended to deny the need to interpret specific representations at all. Now, however, since the active relationship between audiences and texts has been acknowledged, the boundary between textual and contextual work, between representation and history, is breaking down.

At this point, then, it is probably easier to talk of an agreed-upon set of cultural studies practices and approaches from which analysts may choose than at any previous period. We now have broad agreement on the usefulness of the more sophisticated notions of ideology drawn from Gramsci as well as on the limitations to the usefulness of the category of ideology itself; textual analysis is much more historical, more socially coded, because it now takes account not just of signs and signification but of their combinations in particular, culturally specific discourses. The development of the term *discourse* has itself been significant; it refers to socially produced groups of ideas or ways of thinking that can be tracked in individual texts or groups of texts, but that also demand to be located within wider historical and social structures or relations.

The range of discursive analyses is wide. Richard Dyer, for instance, has extended his useful work on the semiotic function of film stars – what they signify independently of the characters they might play – to the examination of particular star images

and their social meanings. Dyer (1986) looks, for instance, at Marilyn Monroe and traces her enclosure within discourses of sexuality during the 1950s. These discourses constructed sexuality in what were then new ways: sex was connected with the core of the self; its expression was a mechanism for psychological health and its centrality to life a rebuttal of notions of sexual guilt and prudery. The key texts in which such discourses could be located are the early issues of *Playboy*, with their emphasis on guilt-free, innocent sexuality, and Monroe is enveloped within the *Playboy* ethic almost literally: she was the magazine's first centrefold. Other examples of discursive analysis, tracking ideological discourses across texts, institutions and history, include Elaine Showalter's (1987) account of the nineteenth-century treatment of madness, which argues that the institutions and technologies employed were a consequence of insanity's construction as a 'female malady', and Angela McRobbie's (1984) analysis of dance clubs and young girls, which examines the way in which the pleasures of dance are set aside as the licensed domain of the female.

Probably the key theoretical influence on the application of the notion of discourse within cultural studies generally over the last decade has been the French theorist, Michel Foucault. The great benefit of Foucault's work in this regard was its explicit reconnection of texts to history. In *Discipline and Punish* (1979), for example, Foucault examines the discourses which enabled the establishment of the prison and other prison-like institutions (the military, the hospital, the school) in late eighteenth-century France and which also structured the specific procedures and disciplines which determined how the inmates experienced their incarceration. Rather than focusing on the reproduction of ideologies, Foucault examined how these enabling discourses directed the operation of power: how these institutions established practices and routines which disciplined behaviour, defined space and regulated the experience of time for those placed within their control. Foucault used the idea of discourse in adventurous, if not entirely methodologically consistent, ways which have been increasingly taken up in cultural studies and are evident in a widening of the range of texts and formations approached for analysis: institutions, cultural policies (such as for urban planning or heritage management), the cultural definition and regulation of the body and sexuality, and so on.

## APPLYING THE PRINCIPLES

In this section, I want to apply some of the principles I have been summarizing, to show them in action in a 'reading' of a text. This will demonstrate what kind of knowledge actually emerges from a cultural studies approach, and might reinforce definitions of some basic terms. What follows is not, however, meant to be a definitive reading of its subject; rather, it is a set of notes that might indicate the shape of further interpretation.

Our topic is not a television programme or a film, or a photograph, but a cultural and political figure – ex-Lieutenant-Colonel Oliver North. I want to suggest how we might employ cultural studies principles to interpret him as a sign. And, I stress, these suggestions may have little to do with a *material* Oliver North you could call on the phone; this is a reading of the cultural construction of Oliver North.

We could start with some account of North's placement within the institutions he served, analysing the ideological formations through which he was inserted into the culture. Or we could provide a history of the patriotic/military discourses within which he makes the most sense; this would involve a study of state institutions and their political and social histories. For our purposes here, I am content to start with a text, using it as a means of access to the codes, myths, discourses and ideologies that give North his meaning. While this is only a beginning, I think we will find it can take us quite some distance.

Figure 1.2 depicts Oliver North at a press conference after his conviction on three of the twelve criminal charges connected with the Iran-Contra scandal. We might begin in the same way we did with our analysis of the Marcos photo, by noting the major signs and their arrangement within the frame. North and his wife obviously dominate the photo, but their relationship is significantly different from that of Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos in our earlier example. As the caption states unequivocally, Betty North is by her husband's side both physically and figuratively. The two are standing close together, North drawing support from his wife. He is still the dominant figure, but his wife could not look more committed to the cause of proving her husband's innocence. The positioning of the other major sign in the photo, the American flag, facilitates such a reading. North's relation to the flag and what it represents is, at least, ambiguous; he can be constructed,



Figure 1.2 Oliver North, with his wife Betty by his side, speaks to newsmen at his lawyer's Washington office (Reprinted with kind permission of AAP.)

as we shall see, as either defending or betraying the ideals it symbolizes. Its inclusion in the photo, and its central position within the frame, integrates North and his cause with that of the United States, although one cannot dismiss the possibility of reading the photograph as massively ironic.

North's expression, that of his wife, and his posture are important signifiers too, but in order to make sense of them we need to move outside this text, and consider how its meaning is produced at least partly through its relation to other photos of Oliver North. The relations between this picture and others of Oliver North are called *intertextual* relations, and they frame our view of him in this example. Although North has gone on to a career as a talk-show host and bit-part actor, his most extravagant celebrity occurred during the 'Contra-gate' hearings. During this period, photos of North exploited a limited repertoire of signifiers: early

in his career as a newsworthy person, he customarily appeared in his uniform, his short haircut signifying his commitment to the defence forces and thus silently denying the possibility of dishonesty; he characteristically appeared in three-quarter profile, jaw thrust forward determinedly, often in mid-speech, as in this example; surprisingly often he was shot from slightly below, looking slightly upward – this had an ennobling, mythologizing effect. The upward look, in particular, had the ambiguous consequence of signifying a respectful but dogged defiance while also invoking his willingness to serve his country, his deference to his superiors and ultimately to the flag. Given the specific nature of his defence (that he was 'only following orders'), and given the role he developed as the representative of an interventionist foreign policy, the repetition of this posture is of some significance. He was certainly more newsworthy, more culturally resonant, within such constructions than he would have been if he had been enclosed entirely within discourses of, for instance, criminality: if, for instance, he was always shot from above, looking down, in dishevelled clothing or hiding his face from the camera.

To take the reading a little further we need to move closer to the discourses implicated in the text. When we connect these signifiers with the mental concept they refer to, we immediately activate competing sets of 'explanations' of, or myths about, North's activities. Photos of North, particularly those of him in uniform, touch off sharply opposed myths for different readers: crudely, what Oliver North signifies to one group is a dangerous, 'Rambotic', military individualism, while to another group he signifies the plainspoken, innocent, and self-sacrificing hero of John Wayne (or Ronald Reagan!) movies. Interestingly, despite the divergent subjectivities producing these different readings, within both interpretations North emerges as a quintessentially American figure; hence, the inevitability of the flag in the photo. The myths and discourses of American nationalism are deeply implicated in North's cultural significance, and since they are themselves far from unified, we should not be surprised at their participation in the contradictions within the meanings of Oliver North.

When we 'read' such texts we need to be aware that language is *polysemic*; that is, it can mean different things to different readers. In North's case, the informing myths aroused by the signifiers in this photo are not only various, but almost diametric-

ally opposed. As a sign, North is a battleground of competing categories: from rogue to national hero to CIA conspirator to scapegoat.

The resolution of this battle has shifted over time: 'Ollie-mania' probably peaked during the 1987 congressional hearings, but the degree of moral loathing directed at North was probably at its peak then too. As time has gone on, however, North's role has been most consistently constructed as the scapegoat for higher-placed figures and as a sign of the opposition between big government and the heroic individual. Ollie-mania has either receded from memory completely or taken on the role of a sideshow. Support for North's acquittal, however, came from both those who felt he had done nothing wrong and those on the opposite side of the political fence who felt he should not pay for the crimes of his superiors. This might explain the figures published in *Time* magazine (15 May 1989) reporting that 53 per cent of a survey sample were against North going to jail, 45 per cent thought he should be pardoned, and 67 per cent believed George Bush had still to come clean on his own part in the scandal.

North himself has indicated some awareness of his own signifying function, indeed his subsequent career has been built upon it, and press images of him have been remarkably restricted in the repertoire of meanings activated. This photograph is itself an example of that: contributing myths connect him with his role as a family man, staunchly supported by his wife, unjustly accused of serving his country *too* well, but man enough to fight for his hearing without whining or attempting to blame anyone else. He has had help in this, in the media's tacit agreement to recycle images that ennoble him in order to maintain the heat on the administration he served. The most widely used photograph of North in the Western press is his taking of the oath at the congressional hearings, the perfect image of the model soldier. This encouraged the view of him as a scapegoat, a small but loyal player taking the rap for his superiors. The circulation of such an image prolonged and fuelled speculation about just who North was serving: Who was the subject of the dutiful, selfless gaze? From North's point of view, such images can only have done his cause good, but those who would read this text in opposition to such a construction might be tempted to see it as further evidence of corruption and duplicity.

This reading, so far, has been relatively culturally specific in

that it has suggested readings likely to have been negotiated within North's own culture. From outside the United States, the meanings may have taken on different inflections: the major story outside the United States was Ollie-mania, the status North enjoyed, still enjoys, with some sections of the American public, as a national hero. In these 'foreign' constructions, North still operates as a signifier of a particular view of conservative American politics and values: the difference, perhaps, is that very rarely are these values endorsed. Nevertheless, for the foreign press, North the personality was a minor figure compared to North the symbol of American foreign policy under Reagan; most of the Western press used North as the location for a critique of that foreign policy.

This is a useful reminder. A text such as this, and a genre of such texts, always needs to be placed into a historical context. To outline the particular historical conjuncture that produced North's actions and his subsequent celebrity is beyond my brief here, but a reading of this text would not be complete without some consideration of such a context. In fact, there is probably little point in simply 'reading' Oliver North if we do not explore the sources of his constitutive myths in American culture.

An example of such an exploration is Larry Grossberg's (1988) attempt to link North's celebrity with a revival of politically conservative ideologies within America and other Western societies; Grossberg talks of North as one of a new breed of American hero, a breed that includes Rambo, Han Solo of the *Star Wars* films, Sonny Crockett of *Miami Vice*, and – centrally – Ronald Reagan. John Fiske (1987b, 112) links the representations of lead characters in contemporary TV cop and private eye shows (*Magnum, P.I., Miami Vice, Simon & Simon*) with the representation of American experience in Vietnam (*China Beach* and *Tour of Duty*). He sees both trends as working to renovate images of masculine power, legitimating the power of those 'in control of "The Law" to impose that law upon others'. This, too, could be part of the context into which our text can be placed. If Grossberg is right, or if Fiske is right, the appropriate intertextual context for this analysis may be not other photos of Oliver North but the representations of law and authority in American television drama in the late 1980s, or the specific ideological effects of the reconstruction of the Vietnam War on TV and in popular culture generally at that time. This may, in turn, connect us with the

restatement of conservative (naturalized through the term *traditional*) values in American and British politics. Whatever we might conclude, it is important to stress that, ultimately, North's meaning has to be given a specific history, not just a set of texts.