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## Signifying Nothing: 'Culture', 'Discourse' and the Sociality of Affect

Jeremy Gilbert

Two words are so indispensable to the vocabulary of the contemporary humanities that they barely seem to warrant discussion: 'culture' and 'discourse'. The one has been argued over endlessly in the past, and while it continues to form the subject of studies both learned and polemical by leading scholars (Mulhern, 1999; Eagleton, 2000), few if any of them ever actually challenge the received usage of the term. The other has become at least as ubiquitous but more, it seems, by default than by design. Having slipped out of a corner of Foucault's work that he never expected anyone to see (he remarked more than once that he never expected *The Archaeology of Knowledge* to be widely read), and having long-ago escaped the rigorous limitations of socio-linguistics (e.g. the work of Norman Fairclough), 'discourse' is a term which is now everywhere used and nowhere adequately defined. My contention in this paper will be that the vectors which these two terms – 'culture' and 'discourse' - have travelled on converge in a conceptual space that is still difficult to delineate using the vocabularies of mainstream cultural theory, but which is crucial to any effective understanding of the dynamics of culture in the twenty-first century (or, for that matter, any other century), and which is exactly that being opened up by the search for a cultural theory which can properly address the experiential dimension of 'affect'.

Firstly, 'culture'. In an interview published in *Radical Philosophy* at the end of 1997, Stuart Hall is asked if there is any new notion of culture regulating the field of cultural studies in a manner similar to the way in which he identified the culturalist and semiotic paradigms regulating it before and after the structuralist break of the 1970s. He replies as follows:

I am not sure that there is, or ever was, one regulative notion of culture, although the shift you are talking about was a very substantial one. The Williams appropriation 'a whole way of life' as opposed to 'the best that has been thought and said' and high ideas, raised questions from the very beginning. He'd hardly written the sentence before a critique of the organicist character of that definition emerged. It was an important move, the sociological, anthropological move, but it was cast in terms of a humanist notion of social and symbolic practices. The really big shift was the coming of semiotics and structuralism: not because the definition of culture stopped there, but that remains the defining paradigm shift, nonetheless; signifying practices, rather than a whole way of life.

There had to be some relative autonomy introduced into the study of signifying practices. If you want to study their relation to a whole way of life, that must be thought of as an *articulation*, rather than the position Williams had which is that 'everything is expressive of everything else': the practices and the signification, they're all one; the family and ideas about the family are all the same thing. For Williams, everything is dissolved into practice. Of course, the new model was very linguistic, very Saussurean, but nevertheless, that was the definitive break. Everything after that goes back to that moment. Post-structuralism goes back to the structuralist break. Psychoanalytic models are very influenced by the Lévi-Straussian moment, or the Althusserian moment. If I were writing for students, those are still the two definitions I'd pick out, and I wouldn't say there is a third one. I suppose you might say that there is a postmodern one. A Deleuzian one, which says that signification is not meaning, it's all a question of affect, but I don't see a break in the regulative idea of culture as fundamental as the earlier one. (Hall, 1997)

If Hall is thinking of anyone in gesturing towards this possible third, postmodern, Deleuzian paradigm, then it is probably his former student and long-term colleague, Lawrence Grossberg. It's Grossberg who has tried in recent years to develop such a 'postmodern' practice (Grossberg, 1992; Grossberg, 1997a; Grossberg, 1997b). What I want to present here is a set of theoretical reflections, complementary to rather than critical of Grossberg's, on both the logical grounds and the necessary consequences of making such a move; and to suggest that on some level it does indeed necessitate the modification of existing regulative notions of 'culture'.

In doing this, I'm not proposing here to posit such a third, postmodern, Deleuzian paradigm as offering a wholly new regulative idea of culture. Indeed, I'm not proposing to posit such a third paradigm as constituting any radical break with the past at all, although a break with the history of breaks, with the insistence on always seeking out paradigm shifts where more subtle processes of change and continuity may in fact be effective, might be on the agenda. What I am going to try to do is map out some of the issues raised by the possibility of this third paradigm and the question of its relationships with those models Hall identifies as preceding it. One observation I would like to make here is that while there is an obvious danger implicit in Hall's criticism of Williams' attempt to dissolve everything into practice - a danger of drawing too rigid a distinction between practice and other dimensions of experience - I don't think that this is a danger of which Hall and his colleagues have ever been ignorant. Ernesto Laclau – the key theorist of 'discourse' on whose work Hall and others have drawn – recently remarked that he saw no fundamental difference between the statements 'everything is discourse' and 'everything is practice' (both of which he agrees with), other than the fact that nobody can be found to dispute the latter statement.<sup>1</sup>

Thought in these terms, Hall is clearly right to say that one of the necessary effects of the structuralist break in cultural studies was to make possible a differentiation between the different practices, signifying and otherwise, which constitute cultural life. It may be, as he himself suggests, that this resulted in an excessive emphasis on linguistic models of cultural experience, and it may be that a new emphasis on the affective, non-linguistic dimension of cultural experience is required by a new approach. However, what is really at stake in the possibility of a paradigm which focuses not just on meaning but on affect, I will suggest, is the question of how to move this process of conceptual differentiation on (rather than any idea of reversing it), by addressing the issue of the precise nature and rigidity of those differentiations between different types of practice and the different elements making up a whole way of life. A third paradigm, informed by such concerns, rather than moving even further from the work of Raymond Williams might want rather to recapture something of the spirit of Williams' refusal to draw firm distinctions between practice and meaning, but it should also avoid abandoning the gains made by the structuralist moment, and indeed seek to build on them while subjecting them to their own problematising logic.

To get a better sense of the issues at stake here, we need to address this term 'affect'. It is one sign, literally, of its increasing significance that the meanings attached to this term seem to proliferate and slip around. Frederic Jameson famously characterised postmodern culture in terms of the 'waning of affect' (Jameson, 1991), the apparent decline in passionate engagement between subjects and texts. In recent work influenced by English psychoanalysis, such as that of Wendy Wheeler (Wheeler, 1999: 71, 117), the term is used more or less synonymously with 'emotion'. On the other hand, a more precise but rather more difficult definition is offered by Deleuze and Guattari's appropriation of the work of Spinoza (via Nietzsche and Bergson). Probably the most influential figure in transmitting these ideas to an

Anglophone audience has been Deleuze and Guattari's translator Brian Massumi, whose essay 'The Autonomy of Affect', remains a key starting point for any consideration of the implications of the concept. Massumi's own explanation of the term, from his translator's preface to Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*, is as follows:

Affect/Affection. Neither word denotes a personal feeling...*Affect* (Spinoza's *affectus*) is an ability to affect and be affected. It is a prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution of that body's capacity to act. (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988: xvi)

Elsewhere, Massumi writes that 'affect is indeed unformed and unstructured but that it is nevertheless highly organised and effectively analysable (it is not entirely containable in knowledge, but is analysable in effect, as effect)' (Massumi, 1996: 237). So 'affect' is a term which denotes a more or less organised experience, an experience probably with empowering or disempowering consequences, registered at the level of the physical body, and not necessarily to be understood in linguistic terms. So why might we be interested in this terms and its possible usages today?

### **The Sound of Music: 'Discourse' and the Limits of Signification**

It's no accident that it should be Lawrence Grossberg who has looked for this other paradigm. For perhaps more than any other senior figure in the Birmingham-derived mainstream of Anglophone cultural studies, it is Grossberg who has attempted to get to grips with music as a cultural form: not as an adjunct to studies of the visual iconography of youth culture, but as a medium in its own right, with its own tendencies and its own potentialities. Here is a problem familiar to anyone who has tried to do the same. It was until recently a commonplace that cultural studies has had relatively little to say about music as such. Plenty had been written about the spectacular world of youth subcultures and their relationships with the media, but on the subject of music itself, sonic experience, cultural studies had been relatively silent (Gilbert & Pearson, 1999: 38-53). It isn't hard to see why this should be the case. Music is not amenable to analysis using methodologies that prioritise language as the model form of communication. The godfather of structuralism himself, Claude Lévi-Strauss, was one of many commentators to remark that music's specificity lies in the fact that it is registered not just cognitively but at the level of the physical body, in ways in which visual and linguistic media are not (Lévi-Strauss, 1994). Sound vibrations are registered by parts of the body which do not register changes in vibrations of light. Music has *physical effects* which can be identified, described and discussed but which are not the same thing as it having *meanings*, and any attempt to understand how music works in culture must, as many commentators over the years have acknowledged, be able to say something about those effects without trying to collapse them into meanings. Those attempts which have been made to theorise the production of musical effects as productions of meaning, using tools derived from structuralist linguistics – the work of Phillip Tagg, Jean-Jacques Nattiez or Shepherd & Wicke (Shepherd & Wicke, 1997) – are notorious for their impenetrability and their failure to offer convincing analyses of the cultural workings of sound.

However, the fact that sound is difficult to talk about in linguistic terms does not make it desirable, as has been thought by earlier thinkers, simply to consign music to a realm of sublime mystery, impossible to even discuss in any terms, having no

purpose beyond its own pristine existence, expressing nothing but its own logic. The problem we have is that music is by definition an *organised* form of experience, one whose effectivity is strictly delimited by sedimented cultural practices, but it is one whose structured effects cannot be fully understood in terms of meanings; precisely, they cannot be understood according to the structural logic of language. It is to this point that I think this set of reflections leads us – to the observation that, at least as far as music is concerned, a notion of ‘culture’ which sees in it only ‘signifying practices’ is quite simply not up to the job. Music is obviously cultural, but its ‘culturality’ is not limited to its capacity to signify. Music’s sonic-corporeal effectivity is not universal and transhistorical, a fact registered by the simple observation that what is musical for some cultural groups is merely ‘noise’ for others. Of course, music’s capacity to cross cultural barriers which signifying media cannot is famous, and is clearly one of the reasons why music is so central to post-national cultural formations (Gilroy, 1993; Gilbert, 2001). In this sense, music clearly exhibits a great deal of what might be called, following Derrida, ‘iterative force’ (Derrida, 1988; Gilbert 1999) - that is, the capacity to escape its originary context and become operable in another - and its capacity to exhibit such force is obviously connected to its non-significatory affective power. Nonetheless, any detailed attention to the history of such trans-cultural crossings would demonstrate that there are always cultural and historical limits to what can be heard as music, and how it can be experienced. So music is clearly an element of cultural experience, an experience which is subject to relatively high levels of organisation, but which does not necessarily signify as such. We are left with a problem for the idea of culture as made up of signifying practices.

What we are left with, rather, is a notion of culture not merely as the site of ‘symbolic activity’ or ‘signifying practice’, but as the site at which human experience achieves a certain level of organisation, however minimal. Such organisation of experience is, to be sure, the very form and substance of power relationships, and is always irreducibly social in character. Moving far from any notion of culture as somehow ‘expressing’ social relations from which it derives but which it does not constitute, such a model would, as Grossberg has suggested, see power relations as utterly immanent to culture, and vice-versa. Grossberg draws on the Deleuzian vocabulary of affect in his study of American rock culture for just the purpose of delineating such a notion of culture as affectively organised and organising, using ‘affect’ as a term which denotes a more-or-less organised experience, an experience probably with empowering or disempowering consequences, registered at the level of the physical body, and not necessarily to be understood in linguistic terms.<sup>2</sup>

The place where such vocabularies have proved most indispensable, however, is in recent writing on dance music culture. The emergence into mainstream popularity (or, more accurately, popularity with those young, white, middle-class men whom the music press, ‘serious’ broadcasters and broadsheet newspapers have traditionally regarded as the core audience for ‘music’) of styles of music which did not have lyrics or which used lyrics obviously as purely musical elements, like bass and rhythm tracks, played by anonymous DJs and listened to in darkened rooms, posed obvious problems in the 1990s for any model which tried to understand music’s significance in terms of the clearly coded meanings which it could communicate (Redhead, 1993; Gilbert & Pearson, 1999). In fact, this was an issue that had been taken up long before. Richard Dyer’s seminal 1970 essay ‘In Defence of Disco’, written at the moment when punk rock and semiotics were each at the high point of their prestige amongst scholars affiliated to cultural studies, takes an approach to understanding disco music which focuses on its sonic qualities in so far as they enable certain physical effects (Dyer, 1979). Dyer’s praise for the ‘all-body eroticism’ which the lush polyrhythms of disco makes possible, contrasted with the thrusting phallocentrism of

rock, can easily be read as a Spinozan account of gay, even straight-male-feminist bodies empowered by sound (try *David Mancuso Present The Loft*, NuPhonic 1999, or *Classic Salsoul Mastercuts Volume Two*, Mastercuts, 1999, for evidence). Indeed, the very existence of musics which exist primarily to be danced to suggests that any attempt to talk about music-in-culture must have recourse to an understanding of music as effective at the corporeal level, and not merely as an exercise in signification. Indeed, even the most cerebral music of the concert tradition must be understood as working affectively, at least in part: unless music is merely read as an unheard, the strings which vibrate the air which vibrates our skin, membranes and bones communicates a force which is not the same as the cognisable message encoded in the pitch intervals and rhythm (McClary, 1994: 32-3).

Perhaps a historical example will bring the point home. It has long perplexed commentators inside and outside hip-hop culture that militant black nationalists Public Enemy acquired a huge following amongst white youth in North America in the 1980s. This most unexpected and unlikely example of black-white 'crossover' was notable for the complete indifference white audiences demonstrated towards the explicit political content of Public Enemy's lyrics, appearance, record sleeve designs, public pronouncements and so forth. Semiotics simply has no answer to this riddle. Everything about the music and the self-presentation of Public Enemy was explicit in its advocacy of revolutionary politics -so explicit as to leave no discernible room for creative 'decoding' on the part of consumers. And yet their following during their commercial peak in the late 1980s was largely made up of politically conservative suburban white males. What was going on here? From the point of view of an affective analysis, the answer is quite simple. The affective qualities of Public Enemy's music were never that different from those of the heavy rock which was the most popular form with this audience: loud, fast, aggressive, offering the male participant an experience of exciting empowerment and battle-ready determination, at the level of affect this simply was rock music. Although the popularity of Public Enemy, like that of black male artists before and since their heyday, was no doubt also subtended by traditional fantasies about the erotic power and autonomous aggression of black men, it's clearly missing the point to see that as the main issue. It was the speed and power – the affective specificity – of the music that was the support for such fantasies, at least as much as they have offered access to it. This is another example of a complex political situation that cannot be properly understood by reference to music as merely meaningful.

Of course, to argue that music's effects cannot be reduced to meanings is not to say that the issue of meaning is irrelevant to an understanding of those effects. Effects have meanings, even if the two things are not identical. For example, the potentially empowering/subversive affective qualities of disco and its musical descendents or the supposedly phallic 'matterings' of the 'Rock Formation' (Grossberg, 1992) can be at least partially reconfigured by specific discursive practices. For the Riot Grrrls (bands like Hole, Bikini Kill, Babes in Toyland), a masculine rock sound with screaming aggressive vocals and guitars was a means by which to occupy the corporeal-affective space of masculinity, and so challenge the gendered distribution of power in 1990s America (Reynolds & Press, 1995). Disco's sensuality is easily contained by an exclusionary apparatus (dress codes, guest-lists, expensive drugs) which turns it into an indulgence for the wealthy rather than an enacted riposte to all normativity, and this particular mode of territorialisation has been imposed and resisted repeatedly since the 1970s (Lawrence, 2003). The political struggles at stake in the formation and dissolution of such assemblages can only be understood by reference *both* to the affective specificities of the musics in question, *and* to the semiotic contexts in which they are fought over. To try to read disco in terms of its

'significations' (its banal lyrics, its often simplistic and standardised structures) would tell us nothing about why it was important for gay men like Dyer in the 1970s, or how its wordless descendents – house and techno – came to transform the musical milieu of the 1990s. To talk about what Riot Grrrl *meant* without explaining what it *felt like* would be to rob it of all specificity, hearing it as identical either to every other feminist musical project (Tori Amos? Patti Smith? Aretha Franklin? Carla Bley?) or to the masculinist strands of hardcore punk and heavy rock whose forms it appropriated.

The question, therefore, is how to talk about music in a way which takes account of the elaborated physicality of its material effects while acknowledging that such effects will always be mediated by the cultural – and indeed narrowly discursive – conditions in which they occur. An influential solution to this problem is proposed by Robert Walser in his book on heavy metal. Walser, like anyone taking a Spinozan approach, sees music as having corporeal effects that are experienced by musicians and listeners as experiences of empowerment (or, presumably, disempowerment). However, Walser clearly wishes to avoid any naïve idea that these physical effects can be understood as wholly 'raw', as somehow acultural, and he does not refer at all to the Spinoza-Nietzsche-Deleuze tradition (just to be clear: this is not a criticism of Walser). Instead, locating his work in the mainstream of Anglophone cultural theory, he mobilises a Foucauldian vocabulary of discourse. For Walser, 'Music Discourse' includes both the actual concrete sounds of music – the notes, the rhythms, the textures – and the linguistic and visual codes which lend those sound particular meanings in particular contexts:

The analytical notion of discourse enables us to pursue an integrated investigation of musical and social aspects of popular music. By approaching musical genres as discourses, it is possible to specify certain formal characteristics of genres but also a range of understandings shared by musicians and fans concerning the interpretation of these characteristics. The concept of discourse enables us to theorise beyond the artificial division between 'material reality' and consciousness. (Walser, 1993: 45)

Walser here neatly brings us to our second keyword, because he uses the term 'discourse' in a way that has become commonplace, explicitly taking the term to imply that there is no ultimate distinction to be made between the material and the ideal, the physical and the mental, between practice and meaning. It is important to be aware of just where this usage of the word does and does not come from. It is not, actually, how Foucault – normally credited with popularising the term - uses the word 'discourse'. Both he and Derrida refer in their work to the existence of 'discursive' and 'non-discursive' forces, and it is quite clear from a careful reading of those parts of Foucault's work where he is actually interested in the term 'discourse' (which are not that many, it has to be said), that he has no interest in defending the assertion that there is no distinction to be made between the discursive and the non-discursive. The people who *do* actually make this claim explicitly are Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, the leading exponents of that methodology which is referred to within political studies as 'discourse analysis', but which is rather different from the 'discourse analysis' of socio-linguists such as Norman Fairclough and actually no different at all from dominant paradigms of post-structuralist cultural studies (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Torffing, 1999). Under the influence of deconstruction, it is Laclau and Mouffe who make the explicit claim that there is no such distinction to be made, that in effect 'everything is discourse' (a statement which, as already mentioned, Laclau has asserted to be no different in its implications from 'everything is practice'). Laclau and Mouffe write:

The main consequence of a break with the discursive/extra-discursive dichotomy is the abandonment of the thought/reality opposition, and hence a major enlargement of

the field of those categories which can account for social relations. Synonym, metonymy, metaphor are not forms of thought that add a second sense to a primary, constitutive literality of social relations; instead, they are part of the primary terrain itself in which the social is constituted. Rejection of the thought/reality dichotomy must go together with a rethinking and interpretation of the categories which have until now been considered exclusive of one or the other. (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985: 110)

The issue which this influential claim raises, but which is rarely if ever addressed, is this: if the term 'discourse' no longer refers exclusively to the linguistic-cognitive dimension of social experience then it must refer to something much broader. If, in fact, everything is discourse, then the term 'discourse', if it is to have any meaning at all, can only be understood, like a post-logocentric notion of 'culture', as designating some basic organisational level of all human experience. 'Discourse', in this sense, is any form of experience - linguistic or otherwise - which is even minimally organised. However, even where 'discourse analysis' is informed by this explicit claim, it continues to prioritise linguistic constructions as its analytical object and a linguistic vocabulary as its primary theoretical resource, if only by continuing to use the word 'discourse' in this way, with its clear etymological allusion to speech, in preference to any other term. The logical implication of this practice, even if it is never made explicit, is a claim that verbal language is the most adequate systemic metaphor by which to understand the organisational level of all social experience.

**'The divorce proceedings of poststructuralism: terminable or interminable?'  
(Massumi, 1996: 221)**

Clearly this is a claim that has been made and challenged in explicit terms before: it is, after all, the basic claim of structuralism. Lacan's claim that the unconscious is structured like a language is clearly one example of a related claim. Derrida's entire project, conversely, can be understood in terms of his claim that *writing* is a more adequate metaphor with which to understand the processes by which human experience is organised. A key reason for turning to the work of Deleuze and Guattari, amongst others, then, is the fact that they offer an alternative metaphorical vocabulary to any of these, and one which explicitly sets out to avoid some of their limitations, with their language of flows, breaks, and machines (Deleuze & Guattari, 1983). Similarly, Irigaray's vocabulary of phallogormorphism and its others offers another way of understanding social and psychic experience as systematically structured in terms not dominated by linguistic and visual metaphors, as might the work of non-Lacanian psychoanalysts such as Jean Laplanche and Melanie Klein (Irigaray, 1985; Laplanche, 1987). Indeed, most of those thinkers who can actually be identified as ever having made some real break with structuralism, and many who simply have no relationship with it, can be drawn on for this purpose. It might even be that what's really at stake here is the possibility of an engagement between Anglophone cultural studies and French post-structuralism which was never really achieved, despite all appearances to the contrary. Although Grossberg is at pains to differentiate his positions from those of a rather poorly-defined 'post-structuralism' or 'deconstruction' (Grossberg, 1992; 1997a), I'd suggest that we can best get a sense of what some of the political and ethical stakes might be in this discussion by considering the points of affinity between these writers' respective projects and even that of, another, perhaps surprising, figure, to whom I have already alluded: Raymond Williams.

Firstly, consider the relevance of deconstruction to this discussion. As has already been pointed out, the commonplace usage of the term 'discourse' in contemporary cultural theory is primarily derived from the work of Laclau and Mouffe, which has been widely diffused, even its full implications are rarely addressed, and are generally resisted by the only prominent writer in the field to have made any serious study of them, Stuart Hall (Hall, 1986). In fact, Laclau and Mouffe's reading of Derrida can be seen to exemplify the general Anglophone understanding of what is – and is not – at stake in the post-structuralist break with structuralism. In a crucial passage from their definitive work, *Hegemony & Socialist Strategy*, they write:

We have referred to 'discourse' as a system of differential entities – that is, of moments. But we have just seen that such a system exists only as a partial limitation of a 'surplus of meaning' which subverts it. Being inherent in every discursive situation, this 'surplus' is the necessary terrain for the constitution of every social practice. We will call it *the field of discursivity*. This term indicates the form of its relation with every concrete discourse: it determines at the same time the necessarily discursive character of any object, and the impossibility of any given discourse to implement a final suture. On this point, our analysis meets up with a number of contemporary currents of thought which – from Heidegger to Wittgenstein – have insisted on the impossibility of fixing ultimate meanings. Derrida, for example, starts from a radical break in the history of the concept of structure, occurring at the moment in which the centre – the *transcendental signified* in its multiple forms: *eidōs*, *arché*, *telos*, *energia*, *ousia*, *aléthia*, etc. – is abandoned, and with it the possibility of fixing a meaning which underlies the flow of differences. At this point, Derrida generalizes the concept of discourse in a sense coincident with that of our text. 'It became necessary to think both the law which somehow governed desire for a centre in the constitution of a structure, and the process of signification which orders the displacements and substitutions for this law of central presence – but as a central presence which has never been itself, but has always already been exiled from itself into its own substitute. The substitute does not substitute itself for anything which has somehow existed before it, henceforth, it was necessary to begin thinking that there was no centre, that the centre could not be thought in the form of a present-being, that the centre had no natural site, that it was not a fixed locus but a function, a sort of non-locus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions came into play. This was the moment when language invaded the universal problematic, the moment when, in the absence of a centre or origin, everything became discourse – provided we agree on this word – that is to say, a system in which the central signified, the original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of differences. The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely.'

...

Saussure's analysis of language considered it as a system of differences without positive terms; the central concept was that of *value*, according to which the meaning of a term was purely relational and determined only by its opposition to all the others. But this shows us that we are presented with the conditions of possibility of a *closed* system: only within it is it possible to fix in such a manner the meaning of every element. When the linguistic model was introduced into the general field of human sciences, it was the effect of systematicity that predominated, so that structuralism became a new form of essentialism: a search for the underlying structures constituting the inherent law of any possible variation. The critique of structuralism involved a break with this view of a fully constituted structural space; but as it also rejected any return to a conception of unities whose demarcation was given, like a nomenclature, by its reference to an object, the resulting conception was of a relational space unable to constitute itself as such – of a field dominated by the desire for a structure that was always finally absent. The sign is the name of a split,

of an impossible suture between signified and signifier. (Laclau & Mouffe, 1995: 111-13)

A great deal goes on here which we won't have space to unpack: for example, the elision between a Derridean account of the necessary openness of any structure and a Lacanian insistence on the desire for closure which is said to inhere in any such situation (the possibility that it might not – that openness might not be always experienced as lack - is precisely that Deleuzian possibility which Laclau and Mouffe have routinely ignored). A textual quibble with Laclau and Mouffe's appropriation of Derrida should make clear what is at stake here. For, while for them '[t]he sign is the name of a split, of an impossible suture between signified and signifier', the name which Derrida gives to that split is emphatically not 'the sign'. This is not a minor quibble, because the name which Derrida gives to this split is arguably the most significant in the whole of his theoretical lexicon: the *trace*. It is the trace that Derrida posits as upsetting and preceding the constitutive split between signifier and signified which produces the sign. This is a crucial point because it opens out the possibility of a quite different understanding of what exactly is at stake in the post-structuralist moment. From this point of view, what constitutes the post-structuralist break is not simply a de-centring of the concepts of structure and sign, but an impulse to think outside of, or beyond, the Saussurean framework of signs, signifiers and signifieds altogether.

This has important implications for cultural studies. As Hall himself makes clear, the structuralist gesture which re-founded cultural studies was 'very Saussurean', and cultural studies since that moment has relied on and endlessly rehearsed the founding gesture of semiotics, as has that mode of 'discourse analysis' associated with the work of Laclau and Mouffe: in stressing the non-necessary relationship between all discursive terms, in unmasking the cultural constructedness of all apparently natural social phenomena, even in emphasising the polysemic instability of all discursive situations, cultural studies and post-Marxist discourse analysis have nonetheless continued to rely and insist upon the founding concept of structuralist linguistics: the arbitrary and purely differential nature of the sign. Peter Osborne has recently discussed some of the implications of this move, arguing that the foreclosure of any notion of the sign-as-referent implicit in the adoption of a Saussurean model of semiotics for cultural studies has had some drastically limiting, as well as powerfully enabling effects. Amongst these effects have been the capacity it has leant cultural studies to discuss almost any form of social practice using a single vocabulary (the language of text and signification), and the consequent tendency of such a semiotic approach to erase the specific sensuous differences between various types of aesthetic practice. Osborne argues persuasively that this can be understood in terms of the adoption of a Saussurean semiotics – predicated on the assumption that all signs *qua* signs acquire meaning only on the basis of their arbitrary location in a differential system of other signs – in preference to a semiotics drawn from the work of C.S. Peirce, which was always concerned with specifying the various degrees of 'arbitrariness' which different signs could have (a photograph of a flower, for example, being on at least some levels clearly a less arbitrary sign for its denoted referent than is the word 'flower'). As Osborne notes, both Derrida and Deleuze cite Peirce as an important precursor. Despite this, as Osborne's discussion and the preceding remarks should make clear, the doctrine of the arbitrary sign has remained implicitly foundational to both mainstream cultural studies and post-Marxist discourse theory (Osborne, 2000: 20-52).

It is odd, then, that an intervention made as long ago as the 1960s, by a figure as well known in all of these quarters as Jacques Derrida, should have gone so

unremarked in its fundamental implications for any programme relying on this foundational Saussurean assumption. For Derridean deconstruction was always, from the first, if nothing else, the deconstruction of the sign, the deliberate blurring of the line between signifier and signified. This, clearly enough, is the very meaning of Derrida's first great key-concept, his first 'quasi-transcendental' (Gasché, 1986): his notion of 'the trace'. In discussing the distinction between a sign and a symbol (that is, an almost-sign which is not fully arbitrary, but in part 'motivated' in its meaning), Derrida writes:

Without referring back to 'nature', the immotivation of the trace has always *become*. In fact, there is no unmotivated trace: the trace is indefinitely its own becoming-unmotivated. In Saussurean language, what Saussure does not say would have to be said: there is neither symbol nor sign but a becoming-sign of the symbol. (Derrida, 1976:47)

One might just as well say: 'a becoming-arbitrary of the sign'. In other words, Derrida's notion of the arche-trace which precedes signification as such, of an always-already-disseminated writing which precedes speech. and all the rest, is right from the start a deliberate problematisation of the very distinction between signifier and signified on which the Saussurean break in cultural studies rests. In these terms, culture would be thought of as the order, not of the signifier, but of the trace; and such a thinking of culture would necessarily finally displace the privilege accorded to *meaning* as the defining characteristic of culture and the cultural. This notion of the trace as that which cannot be understood in terms of the distinction between signifier and signified upsets the logocentrism implicit in structuralism's obsession with meaning. That cultural studies has inherited this obsession can barely be in doubt. From fashion to film to food, cultural studies is always about *what things mean*. Like Tolkien's elves, cultural studies makes everything – even the trees - speak, whether it wants to or not. Derrida's thought of the trace – without which the generalised concept of 'discourse' would never have been possible – must logically suggest a certain scepticism towards this impulse, or at least towards the idea that it can ever be adequate.

### **Force and Signification: Affect on the Experiential Continuum**

But beyond such logical sophistry, beyond a pedantic desire to follow through the implications of a once-influential work by a once-fashionable philosopher, is there any reason *why* we would want to provoke such a change in cultural studies' sense of identity? Is there any reason why we should want to displace the centrality of meaning to culture's sense of itself? Well, for some of us, as I hope will be apparent by now, there is. Music is that cultural form which most obviously has its specific qualities erased by any attempt to understand it as a language, and whether or not they have actually used the term, almost all theoretical work which has tried to engage with this fact has had to use or develop a model of music as a generator of affects. Just to be clear: this is not a question of disputing the fact that music is also always meaningful. Rather it is to emphasise the extent to which the music cannot be thought without an appreciation of its affective dimension, and to emphasise the extent to which, in the tradition of Spinoza and Nietzsche, this dimension must be understood as bound up with the corporeal nature of musical experience (Nietzsche, 1968: 354, 427-9). In this sense, the affective dimension of musical experience is no doubt bound up with what Barthes calls 'the grain' of music (Barthes, 1977): those tangible qualities of timbre and tone which are derived from music's irreducible materiality (Gilbert & Pearson, 1999).

This is an observation with significance way beyond the study of music. The importance of this dimension to non-musical cultural forms can be illustrated by way of a very simple observation on everyday life. As experience teaches nearly every adult, and pop psychologists never tire of telling us, the tone of the speaking voice determines responses to it more surely and immediately than does the content of the words spoken. Now, semiotics can attempt to map this situation to the signifiatory codes implied by the different possible registers of a human speaking voice. But this captures nothing of the physical-affective quality of hearing or using a loud enraged voice or a melodious, soothing tone. One only has to witness the effect such differences of tone can have on a baby who uses no words, or an animal who never will, to appreciate the degree to which the tone of the voice transmits energies between bodies in a dissemination of forces which no concept of a communicated message or an act of signification can adequately describe.

Although it would be easy to make this observation the basis for some Deleuzian break with all semiotics, discourse analysis and cultural studies, this would surely be a mistake. Within the field marked out by this latter current of thought, a considerable amount of work in recent years has already gestured toward the possibility of grasping these issues. That which has taken inspiration from Derrida's engagement with J. L. Austin has been particularly significant. While it has been predictably misunderstood in many places, the idea of discourse as always characterised by a performative dimension has, properly understood, tended to move in just this direction (Butler, 1993; 1997a; 1997b). The idea of 'discourse' as always in part a matter of transmissions of force as well as signification is not far from the assertion that all discourse has a performative as well as a descriptive character. This idea – popularised by Judith Butler and derived in part from Foucault's work on 'truth effects' as well as Althusser's model of ideology as material and institutional in character – necessarily implies that all discourse has to be understood as operating through the production of effects, rather than simply through the organisation of knowledge and meanings. Indeed, Austin's concept of 'illocutionary force' – that performative and normative capacity which all statements, however apparently neutral and descriptive, must have – contributes usefully to the discussion here.

The significance of this concept is that it emerges from Austin's own failure to make a clear distinction between 'performatives' and purely descriptive 'constative' utterances. Beginning his seminal study *How to Do Things with Words* with this distinction, he concludes by abandoning it in favour of the concept of illocutionary force as a quality possessed to a greater or lesser degree by all utterances (Austin, 1962). Similarly, we might argue that there is a signifiatory and affective dimension to all discourse/cultural practice. Rather than positing some pure 'autonomy of affect' (as Massumi, of course, ultimately does not do in his provocatively titled essay), we might posit a continuum of experience which would locate the abstraction of pure cognition at one end of the scale and the pure corporeality of abject panic, or orgasm, at the other. This would be a continuum of experiential organisation, with the most highly 'organised' forms of experience being those subject to the logics of verbal and even mathematical symbolisation, the least highly organised being those motor responses over which humans have the least control (hormonal flows, especially of adrenaline; breathing, although of course even this can be learned and unlearned), and those absolute intensities which cannot be contained within a logic of signification. In this context, the significance of Massumi's distinction between emotion and affect becomes absolutely clear:

An emotion is a subjective content, the socio-linguistic fixing of the quality of an experience which is from that point onward defined as personal. Emotion is a

qualified intensity, the conventional, consensual point of insertion into semantically and semiotically formed progressions, into narrativizable action-reaction circuits, into function and meaning. It is intensity owned and recognized. It is crucial to theorise the difference between affect and emotion. (Massumi, 1996: 221)

The problem this formulation raises is that of the status of the social. There is a clear elision in this description between 'the social', 'the linguistic' and the 'subjective' which Massumi's own Deleuzian perspective ought to render problematic. For the moment, however, let us settle on the recognition that within this framework the term 'culture' would designate that level at which experience is subject to any form of social organisation: linguistic, subjective or otherwise.

One of the most important consequences of this move is that it enables us to sidestep the endless arguments about the dichotomies between thought and reality, between mind and body, between ideality and materiality, and to finally go beyond their simple refutation. Instead, it allows us to theorise the relationships between these different aspects of experience as *themselves historically variable*. This is one implication of Butler's theorisation of materiality as itself a historically-variable effect of power relations (Butler, 1993), a gesture which can itself be understood as implicitly aligned to a Deleuzian materialism. The idea that the configurations of mind and body, interiority and exteriority typical of modern western subjects are only one historically specific example of such configurations is not new: it goes back at least to Nietzsche (Grosz, 1994: 115-37). However for us it certainly does necessitate the deployment of a new vocabulary: one not bound by the logocentric assumptions of structuralism.

This observation returns us to the question of 'discourse'. It is not clear in this context just how useful this term would continue to be, unless it were reined in once more to designate only those elements of cultural experience subject to very specific *types* of organisation. Under these circumstances, Laclau's proposition that forms of rhetoric be understood as the basis for an entire ontology of experience (Laclau, 1998; Butler, Laclau & Žižek, 2000: 73-82) would still have a great deal of validity, but would have to be understood as limited to those areas of culture subject to the particular forms of organisation which that vocabulary was appropriate to describe: just as psychoanalysis, on which much of Laclau's argument rests – would have to concede that the conscious and unconscious structures it maps do not exhaust the range of possible experiences of being (or failing-to-be) human. Yet again, what this concession would leave us needing would be a theoretical vocabulary with which to describe and discuss modes of social experience which do not operate according to either the signifiatory or the rhetorical logics of language.

It is here, once again, that we see the logical, and not merely poetic, reasons for a possible turn to the work of Deleuze and Guattari, even for a cultural theory which remained rooted in the mainstream tradition of cultural studies. The pragmatic fact is that there is simply no other body of work which goes so far in trying to delineate a new vocabulary for designating the possible organisational forms of human and non-human experience outside the limitations of the structuralist paradigm, its psychoanalytic variants and their 'post-structuralist' modifications as typified by the work of Laclau and Mouffe. It cannot be emphasised too strongly how far this need not necessarily lead to some radical break with the 'continuous' tradition of cultural studies. Indeed, as promised earlier, it is worth considering now the similarity between the set of concerns raised here and those raised over 20 years ago by none other than Raymond Williams in his discussion of one of the terms he has bequeathed to cultural studies, 'structure of feeling'. It's remarkable, I think, that this term, one of the most archaic in Williams' 1970's vocabulary, with all of its romantic

humanist connotations, simply refuses to die. It continues to crop up again and again in essays and articles across a number of fields. It's worth reflecting for a moment on the similarity between the terms 'feeling' and 'affect', with their similar polyvalencies (both implying contact, sensation, intensity, tactility and emotion), and considering that in looking for precise vocabularies with which to describe organised modes of experience that might need to be thought in terms of affect rather than meaning, we are not only striking out into a brave new world of avant-garde theory, but are to some extent actually returning to Raymond Williams. At the same time, from the point of view of a Deleuzian orientation, Williams' exposition of this concept is in places quite remarkable. As he puts it in *Marxism and Literature*:

If the social is always past, in the sense that it is always formed, we have indeed to find other terms for the undeniable experience of the present....

... it is the reduction of the social to fixed forms that remains the basic error. The mistake, as so often, is to take terms of analysis as terms of substance....

Practical consciousness is almost always different from official consciousness, and this is not only a matter of relative freedom or control. For practical consciousness is what is actually being lived; and not only what it is thought is being lived. Yet the actual alternative to the received and produced fixed forms is not silence: not the absence, the unconscious which bourgeois culture has mythicised. It is a kind of feeling and thinking which is indeed social and material, but each in an embryonic phase...

What we are defining is a particular quality of social experience and relationship, historically distinct from other particular qualities, which gives the sense of a generation or of a period. The relations between this quality and the other specifying historical marks of changing institutions, formations, and beliefs, and beyond these the changing social and economic relations within and between classes, are again an open question...

Such changes can be described as changes in *structures of feeling*....

Structures of feeling can be described as social experiences *in solution*... Yet this specific solution is never mere flux. It is a structured formation which, because it is at the very edge of semantic availability, has many of the characteristics of a pre-formation. (Williams, 1977: 128-34)

The affinities with Deleuze and Guattari's project are striking. In particular, in both cases the attempt to name, designate and describe social experience in its quasi-positivity is couched partly in terms of a rejection of the bourgeois-psychoanalytic ontology of lack. Rejecting at the same time the individualism inherent in psychoanalysis' assumptions about the nature of the subject and its consequent assumption that the desire of the socialised subject can only ever be understood in terms of an irreducible lack, a perpetually absent fullness which could, in its hypothetical realisation, only ever be associated with asociality, they gesture towards a radical recovery of the assumption that human existence is always already irreducibly social.

## The Sociality of Affect: For a Deconstructive Social-ism

What all of these writers share is a mistrust for, and a desire to avoid, are notions of cultural, political or social experience as characterised by the intentionality of individual subjects. It is for just this reason that Massumi rejects the impulse typical of much of the English-language treatment of Spinoza and others to translate the term 'affect' as 'emotion'. Yet as we have seen there is already an elision in his own formulation between the cognitive, the linguistic, the subjective and the social. From the Deleuzian perspective recommended by Massumi, it is imperative to resist such an elision, precisely because structuralism and certain branches of post-structuralism have been characterised by their understanding of language as *the* medium of sociality itself, such that the latter cannot be thought other than as occurring through the former, even to the point where their respective structures may be understood as simultaneous. The Lacanian Symbolic – whereby language, the social, and patriarchy are theorised as more-or-less co-terminous, is clearly one example. By the same token, thinkers such as Wittgenstein, Volosinov, and their various descendants have understood sociality as itself the essential characteristic of language. As we have already seen, cultural studies has, since the 1970s, defined 'culture' exclusively as the field of symbolic activity in a given society, while so-called 'discourse-theoretical analytics' tends to concentrate exclusively on politics as a struggle over meanings. In both cases, this near-exclusive focus on processes of signification is not grounded merely in self-limiting modesty, but in an implicit endorsement of the claim that sociality and language are logically simultaneous if not literally identical.

Derrida's deconstruction of the sign, his positing of the trace-network as that which precedes the distinction between signifier and signified, not only legitimates the erasure of the distinction between the discursive and the non-discursive, but must simultaneously erase the conceptual hierarchy which accords verbal language priority as the key metaphor for all other forms of social practice. This is not to say that some other form of practice or knowledge must be accorded a similar privilege. Rather, these observations require that meaning be considered as but one portion on a continuum of effects which discourse/practice may have, and that the meaningful be considered only one dimension of the social: sociality must be understood as a necessary condition for meaning, but meaning must not be taken to exhaust the reality of sociality.

The habitual Lacanian response to this situation is illuminating. Clearly Lacanian theory possesses a category by which to understand that-which-is-not-meaningful (which yet is the cause, and the impossible object, of meaning): the Real (Žižek, 1989). However, 'the real' is a definitively undifferentiated and undifferentiable category which effectively consigns all that is not experienced within the realm of meaning to the category of the unknowable. It is an important contention of this paper that non-linguistic aspects of social experience can be discussed and differentiated, even if they must be brought within the realm of linguistic meaning in order to make this possible.

This is not to dispute the importance of the Lacanian framework for understanding social phenomena. But it is to insist that such phenomena possess dimensions which exhaust its explanatory possibilities, in particular when such phenomena are irreducibly collective in character. Consider, for example, the relationship between the supporters at a football match. Football is one of the most important elements of British culture, and of the culture of many places in the world, and clearly a Lacanian discourse analysis can offer much in enabling us to understand the nature of the relationships that exist between football fans. Obviously, they are bound together by

a common identification with their team, by a shared fantasy of unity-in-omnipotence, by the extent to which the success of the team seems to offer the promise of an absent fullness being realised in the lives of individual fans and in the being of the community which the team is taken to represent. The football chant is perhaps the simplest and most legible form of social discourse in contemporary culture: it says simply 'we are good: you are bad', locating the opposing side as the constitutive outside which sustains the identity of the community of supporters and players, making it, in Laclau's terms, a model 'tendentially empty signifier' (Butler, Laclau & Žižek, 2000: 57; Laclau, 1994).

However, this is simply not a full explanation of what takes place between spectators at a football match. Such an explanation can only go so far as to analyse the speech, symbols, and chants of the crowd and its constituent members, and the fantasies which they sustain. As simple and basic as the football chant may be, as irreducible a dimension of the scenario as fantasy may be, neither constitute the most basic or the most fundamental unit of the shared experience contributing to the scene we are imagining. The most intense and significant form of verbal activity engaged in by fans at a football match is not even the chant, but the wordless or semi-articulate cheer: an activity at once expressive and affective, but without *meaning* as such. The relations between football fans must surely be understood as occurring not *only* via the medium of their shared identification with their team, but with an identification *with each other* that is not reducible to any other identification, and which, not being grounded in fantasy but in the actuality of a shared physical experience, of proximity and tactility and the transversal transmission of affective force (the 'Mexican wave' would be a perfect illustration of this), is not amenable to a linguistic psycho-analysis. Nonetheless, such an experience will be organised, describable, and differentiated. As such, it demands vocabularies other than those that rely on language as their master-metaphor to describe it.

It is at this point that Deleuze and Guattari emerge yet again as an obvious point of reference. Their entire project can be understood as the elaboration of a vocabulary and conceptual framework which resists two sets of imperatives: the logocentrism of structuralism and its descendants, and the residual individualism of any theory of 'the subject'. The vocabulary of 'affect' which Deleuze and Guattari borrow from Spinoza, is mobilised in order to give substance to just those dimensions of experience which, for example, characterise the quasi-physical relationships between football fans. Their language of 'desiring-machines' and 'rhizomes' is precisely designed to describe patterns of experience in terms which wholly refuse to assume that either the individual or some traditional form of collective agent ('class', 'nation') is the basic unit of experience.

For Deleuze and Guattari, the football crowd might constitute a 'dividual' subject-group, a collective assemblage of mutual empowerment: a desiring machine. From such a perspective, it might be argued that what both binds us together and breaks us apart as human beings - or as machines, or assemblages, or pieces of assemblages or elements of machines, or as subject-groups or elements thereof, or as multiplicities and multitudes - is as much unmeaningful, asignifying experience as any process of making common meanings. Indeed, it might be that the process of making meaning is almost always, ultimately, tied irrevocably to the assertion of individuality at the expense of sociality. Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen has in fact theorised the contagious, transversal affects which pass between members of groups as precisely that which psychoanalysis refuses to recognise, except as a terrifying form of irrationality, in asserting its model of an irreducibly individual subject whose identifications can only ever be singular (Borch-Jacobsen, 1988; Borch-Jacobsen,

1994). Against the psychoanalytic assertion of the Subject (even the 'split subject' of Lacanian theory) as the basic unit of all experience, we might observe that at a time when ever-intensifying processes of individualisation go hand in hand with the ever-more-rapid production and circulation of codes and meanings – these processes converging everywhere from the neo-confessional cult of therapy to the practices of postmodern branding – then the elaboration of critical perspectives may depend upon the capacity to understand culture as the site at which experience is organised by processes which are irreducibly social, but not necessarily meaningful.

It's in this sense that a post-logocentric cultural theory should not only be seen as the latest in a succession of theoretical fads, but as contributing to a long tradition of socialist analysis. Here I mean 'socialist' in the most fundamental sense, designating a belief in the irreducible sociality of human experience. This understanding – as formulated here - runs wholly counter to a certain vulgar Marxist tradition of thought about the nature of the social. For that tradition which seeks to know the social as a totality, relationality (which constitutes the relations of human beings to each other and to their environment) is ultimately finite: to understand the relationality of the social is therefore to know a fixed and determinable set of relationships which, fully known, can guarantee full knowledge of the social. According to this model, it is the relationality of human existence which, at the highest level of analysis, guarantees its transparency and its ultimate non-contingency. Wholly against this view, I would argue that once we accept that relationality is infinite, we must understand it not as the guarantee of any kind of fixity but as the infrastructure of an irreducible contingency. Sociality = relationality = contingency = *différance*. In fact, the term 'sociality' has already been used in just this way by Borch-Jacobsen in his deconstruction of Freud's social psychology.

Competitive individualism has emerged across a vast range of sites as the hegemonic ideology of contemporary neo-liberalism, working against any notion of collectivity, of public good, of shared experience – from the education system to the cultures of popular music. It is surely one of the tasks of cultural studies today to work against this hegemony. Not merely grounded in a shallow creed of selfishness, individualism is both an epistemology and a metaphysics as well as an ideology (perhaps it could only ever be all three at once). The task of avoiding complicity with it is therefore a challenging one which confronts us in many spheres, not least that of cultural theory. While 'Marxists' like Slavoj Žižek see in both cultural studies and deconstruction only a liberal complicity with hegemonic forms of cosmopolitan liberalism (Butler, Laclau & Žižek, 2000), I hope to have suggested here some ways (by no means the only ones) in which an engagement between them can avoid this being the case. The sources drawn on here, from Williams to Derrida to Deleuze, all implicitly suggest that a cultural theory grounded in psychoanalysis and semiotics is always at risk of such complicity. It would be naïve, crude and plain wrong-headed to insist that it is *necessarily* so. But if nothing else, these non-structuralist writers can offer us tools with which to work against the will of neo-liberal culture to articulate cultural studies with its own hegemonic discourses, and hence to neutralise its critical capacities at just the moment when they may be most needed. To think affect is to think the social, and nothing is more important right now.

## Endnotes

1 This remark was made at an event celebrating the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of Laclau & Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985) at the Tate Modern gallery, London.

Elsewhere I have taken a slightly different route, drawing on Luce Irigaray, Judith Butler and feminist and queer musicology in an attempt to develop models with which to describe and discuss music and its organised effects, but the issues at stake are precisely the same (Gilbert & Pearson, 1999).

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