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ESCAPES FROM THE CULTURAL PRISON-HOUSE

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I

In *Commissariat of Enlightenment*, Sheila Fitzpatrick's study of educational and artistic policies in the first four years of the Russian Revolution, there is an account of Lenin making "an unscheduled speech" at the first all-Russian Congress on extra-mural education (9 May 1919).

> "I regard," he said, all intellectual fantasies of 'proletarian culture' with ruthless hostility. To these fantasies I oppose the ABC of organization. The task of proletarian discipline is to distribute bread and coal in such a way that there is a careful attitude to each unit of coal and each unit of bread . . . If we solve this very simple, elementary problem, we shall win . . . The basic task of 'proletarian culture' is proletarian organization."[1]

With this organizational sledgehammer Lenin demonstrated the extremely fragile equipment that Marxism as practice brought to the formulation of anything resembling a cultural policy.

Although the experiences of the Bolsheviks served to highlight the absence of a cultural policy, they also marked the beginning of a Marxist discussion on culture which has only in the past two decades presented something of a coherent theoretical debate. Lenin's disdain for "proletarian culture" was, of course, a distrust of the intellectualizing of the Revolution through art as much as it was a campaign against the Infantile Disorder of the Anarcho-Syndicalist left. But his description of coal, bread and organization as culture was equally an attempt to reclaim the term "culture" from those who had appropriated it as "High Culture." By the very choice of their cultural policies, the Bolsheviks exposed the problem of having any Marxist definition of culture. Lunarcharsky, as Commissar of Education, discovered in a practical way that culture was not easily compartmentalized. Even if culture was defined in the conventional terms of the arts, education, the mass media or beliefs, Narkompos, the Ministry of Enlightenment, was not in control of everything. Other ministers or departments controlled propaganda, public monuments, religion and even publishing, and the issues of whether creative activity should be directed by the state, whether it should emerge

spontaneously out of the new revolutionary situation, or indeed whether it should be defined at all, emerged as questions that were central to the Revolution's own sense of itself. In addition, there were the conflicting meta-diachronic interpretations of the growth of "Enlightenment" — from the metaphysical apocalyptic hopes of, say, Alecsander Blok, to the promise of more equality and at least an absence of poverty that the workers articulated in their soviets and which Lenin addressed in all his speeches. Because the Enlightenment reached Russia 150 years after the rest of Europe, the clash of definitions and interpretations was greater, and Enlightenment itself barely had time to assert itself before its limits had been set by organization.[2] The fluidity of search for the definitions and practices that might take on meaning under the concept of culture, had a stronger definition imposed on them. The revolution of sensibilities and alternatives was institutionalized. Forms were frozen and utopias situated. Culture ceased to be bacteriological; rather it became horticultural. The task of the Revolution was to husband the slender plant it had grown. It was to be a culture without risk, experiment or conflict.

This historical moment is worth recording because the issues raised in the Bolshevik Dawn were not resolved by it; in fact the Revolution opened the floodgates of theorizing and the construction of practical alternatives. Beyond that, Lenin's cry of pain at hearing culture-vultures remaking His Revolution has a familiar urgency, and a historical legacy: "The philosophers have continued to interpret the world . . . the point is to change it." Sixty-one years after Lenin's attack on Protetcult (which the Bolsheviks with Krupskaya's philistine energy, successfully transformed into a propaganda machine) and 150 years after Hegel thought that he had finally abolished theorizing, the conundrum of culture has been puzzled over more than ever, and the left has been most prominent in the exercise.

II

Linguistics was one of the areas that Stalin left free from censorship (after he assumed Lenin's mantle) on the grounds that it could not "be ranked either among the bases or the superstructures."[3] It was a bold gesture which unfortunately did not rescue formalism from the limbo into which both Lenin and Trotski had cast it, though Futurism, transferred to Germany, lived on in the work of Piscator and Brecht. Formalism had already adapted linguistics as the ultimate metaphor. Trotski was surely right: "An apparent objectivism, based on accidental secondary and inadequate characteristics, leads inevitably to the worst subjectivism. In the case of the formalist school it leads to the superstition of the word."[4] Indeed, the word or the cultural artifact dominated the consciousness of the early intellectual revolutionaries and in many aspects it is easy to see why. The crucial issue which the revolution faced

was one which had been evident in all philosophy and political practice since the eighteenth century; to assess what of past knowledge was relevant to a dramatically changed situation. Inevitably confronting this issue the artifacts of knowledge — written documents, paintings, sculpture, architecture (or, rather, buildings), music (or, rather, scores) and film — would be subjected to scrutiny. Perhaps inevitably also language — apparently the one uniquely human activity — would become the metaphor for that exploration. But Trotski and Lenin were both right in seeing that linguistics, as a science, was hardly adequate in coming to terms with knowledge as culture. Language was empirically and cognitively only part of the problem. Text could only be seen in context. The major issues in culture were the lived-through relationships, the imposition of codes on an everyday making sense, and the rapidly shifting cognitive and artifactual sense of time. Trotsky, the marxist Gnostic Jew, was well aware of the perils and advantages of reifying "the word." Had not the Torah imposed the word as law only to see it negated by practice? Was not the Revolution a leap into the dark; a dialectical leap based on a Pascalian wager? Trotski's *History of the Russian Revolution* is a monument to that wager. "Each of the great revolutions marked off a new stage of the bourgeois society, and new forms of consciousness for its classes. Just as France stepped over the reformation, so Russia stepped over formal democracy. The Russian revolutionary party, which was to place its stamp on a whole epoch, sought an expression for the tasks of the revolution neither in the Bible nor in secularized Christianity called 'pure' democracy, but in the material relations of the social classes."[5]

In his *Legitimation of Belief*, Ernest Gellner takes this leap of development as the major point in the analysis of the sense of change, a change which is both empirical (more cities, more people, more genres) and also cognitive. The sense of change requires new equipment *and* a weeding out of the old. The formalists wanted to *contain* the text in terms of artistic autonomy. Revolution exposes the inadequacies of that endeavour. As Gellner writes:

> Fundamental intellectual endeavour, philosophical thought, starts not from a revelation, or a premise, or a *tabula rasa*. The *tabula rasa* is a good methodological device, but has no relation to a real historic starting point. The real starting point was a justified sense of chaos, of cognitive breakdown. Of course, had there not been a previous more or less viable structure, however questionable its bases, there would have been no mind, no anguish to initiate that endeavour. Thought begins in the collapsing of an old order.[6]

The tension between the organizational sense of what has to be and the literary sense of what has been produces the sense of what might be. This article, for a good reason, begins with a moment of our intellectual endeavour, rather than with the ossification of our past records. Although we have to live our mundane lives through their definitions of us (whether they are paintings, ideologies or social structures), in the last resort we have to live through our own sense of making it. Ernest Gellner again: "We are bound to consider our morale *par provision* and our world *par provision* jointly. We choose our world through a kind of cognitive *morale*, and our ethics through the kind of concepts which make sense in the world we choose."[7]

In many ways structuralism — and hence linguistics and formalism — was trapped by the occasion of its own creation. The preoccupation with sign-systems became an occasion for freezing action. Linguistic theory and its attendant models became the crutches on which Enlightenment man could support himself. He could talk about everything from computers to folklore, James Joyce, mental institutions, and the face of Garbo.

But what could be done to incorporate such analysis into a theory of action and practice? It is perhaps important to start with Frederic Jameson's apparent resolution to the problems posed by our linguistic incarceration, because it suggests the road that we have travelled since 1919. Having surveyed the heritages of formalism, structuralism and hermeneutics, Jameson's conclusion is that we must view truth as a transcoding, as a translation of one code to another. He writes:

> Such a formula would have the advantage — in Derrida's sense — of freeing structural analysis from the myth of structure itself; of some permanent and spatial-like organization of the object. It would place that 'object' between parenthesis, and consider the analytic practice as 'nothing but' an operation in time . . . The hermeneutic here foreseen would, by disclosing the presence of pre-existing codes and models and by reemphasizing the place of the analyst himself, re-open text and analytic process to all the winds of history.[8]

Jameson is right, in one sense, if we accept linguistics as the basis for understanding culture, and if we recognize that the rise of linguistics is a search for a scientific basis for understanding anything. "Semiology," wrote Roland Barthes, "is a science of forms, since it studies significations apart from their content."[9] But what is culture if not content? The problem with making the study of culture "scientific" is that we run the risk of robbing it of

those crucial elements that give it its meaning — making sense, husbanding, destroying, reformulating. We translate it into codes by which ultimately we feel trapped. In art and literature, the codes so dominate our understanding that we even create with their dominance implanted in our consciousness. The leading linguistic theorists are probably more aware of the problem than anyone else. As Barthes puts it, "Semiology, once its limits are settled is not a metaphysical trap: it is a science among others, necessary but not sufficient."[10] But Barthes is not the average semiologist, just as Freud is not the average psychoanalyst. For the acolytes the system *is* reality. Semiology becomes the "metaphysical trap". Form takes over from content.

The important lesson that linguists have taught us over the past sixty years is that our lives can be measured neutrally, that what we say may not be important except to us, and that classification and distinctions are part of our everyday realities. What they have not taught us is that language changes according to our everyday experience, that the syntax matters less than the sense, or that history is more than "a cry in the street."

The central issue that Marx raised about culture was that our everyday making sense was confounded by not encountering the real, everyday world. Linguistics as a strategy for analysis projects the everyday world as a torment that can only be encountered in Form. The form matters because it represents our non-sense.

The battle for sense will only be won by recognizing that the interpretations of our own activities have to be surmounted and transcended through a clear perception of our reality. We need to pay attention less to linguistics than to language as a lived-through reality. Eric Patridge's *Historical Slang*[11] is more alive with ourselves than Saussure's metaphorical and schematic appropriation of our sensibilities. What we have to return to is not systems but the occasions that gave rise to them. Not Psychoanalysis but Freud's Vienna, not Semiotics but Roland Barthes's Paris, not Christianity but the anguish of living in Roman Palestine, are what matter. In other words, to recognize that the contexts giving rise to the interpretation are more important than the interpretations imposed as a last resort on these situations by people so concerned to solve, once and for all, the problem. The solution is invariably partial. We should recognize that the frameworks frame us. Our liberation is personal, social, intellectual and political. We escape by recognizing the necessity of losing our supports.

Culture — as the formalists demonstrated[12] — involves both a coming to terms with the inherited artifacts and documents, and — as the phenomenologists tried to show — living through and transcending the present. We make our own culture, but the making is not entirely of our choosing. Formalism and structuralism supply that sense of restriction, phenomenology the escape routes. Culture is knowledge both in the sense that

it involves the recognition of other peoples' knowing and in that it is cognizant of the importance of our own re-knowing. We were here before but not exactly in the same place nor with the same people. Our sense of hope is contained in those revolutionary moments when a new world seemed to be offered; our sense of despondency that it was instantly re-made into a formal, structured sameness. Between our phenomenological hopes and our intuitive feeling that nothing will change because we need to have the props to lean on, lies the dichotomy of culture. Ernest Gellner's commentary on Marx's *Thesis on Feuerbach* is surely right:

> Our culture is not a solution, it is a problem. We need some way of looking at it without doing so on its own terms ... No doubt there is some *hubris* in this. Karl Marx was amongst those who noticed this. In the most interesting of the *Thesis on Feuerbach* he observes 'the doctrine that men are products of circumstances and upbringing and that, therefore, changed men are products of other circumstances and changed upbringing, forgets that circumstances are changed precisely by men and that the educator must himself be educated. Hence this doctrine necessarily arrives at dividing society into two parts, of which one towers above society . . . The coincidence of changing circumstances and of human activity can only be conceived and rationally understood as revolutionizing practice. The educator must himself be educated; the criteria which are to guide assessment and change can hardly be drawn from the unregenerate, problematic order.[13]

And yet, in a fundamental way, it is that order that we use to make sense of the present. We build out of the ashes of chaos.

The initial problem is definitional. Posing the existence of culture as if it were something to be isolated, analysed and dissected clearly raises conceptual problems which the rich outcrop of works available has done little to resolve. But in large measure a tendency in positivistic social theory to relate a segment of social "behaviour" with a segment of "culture" in order to establish a connecting link (e.g. social mobility and the language of schoolchildren or political decision-making and regional culture) is even more problematic in that we are frequently unsure of the significance of the conclusions for an understanding of either social morphology or cultural practice.

The discussion of culture ranges from symbolics to values, from ideologies to language, from process to structures. In studies of culture we consequently note attempts at grasping totalities of interrelationships, as well as specifics of genre, from examining the commonality of symbols to the uniqueness of cultural moments or breaks. Much of the dynamic of the controversies during this century has come from the attempt, following Saussure's linguistics, at separating on the one hand, diachronic and synchronic interpretations of culture with the counter-emphasis of treating the time of the now as either positing a major epistemological break with the past or as being in debt to a historical legacy which the present cannot or should not shake off. The theoretical schools, whatever their nomenclature, have been acutely conscious of these dilemmas and have offered different solutions to them. For example, even within the Frankfurt school with its apparent emphasis on diachrony and the wedding of culture with the superdetermination of ideology, we have the work of Benjamin — followed in part by Adorno — which emphasizes at once a frozen synchrony and a processional history, fractured by Apocalypse. Benjamin's writing and Adorno's *Minima Moralia* offer a series of vignettes, both structuralist and didactic, which are echoed by the diachronic undertones of some of Roland Barthes's critiques of myths. Barthes's own attempt at making a distinction between a science of literature or signs and literary criticism both poses a timeless methodology for understanding symbolic relations and, at the same time, allows for shifts in evaluation made by different writers over time.

The problem of the analysis of culture centres not only on the reconstruction of models (with their usual metaphorical or analogical traps) which are both synchronically and diachronically heuristic, but also in the reading (or transcoding in Greimas's term)[14] that is necessary for translating whatever homologies are taken as pertinent. But such a task will not be achieved at the conceptual level alone. As Raymond Williams's life-work indicates, analysis will only be validated by an ongoing debate and encounter with the manifestations of culture, past and present, in an encounter which refuses to be trapped into either the purely didactic or to be shunted into the abstrusely analytical, operating instead as it were, on the knife-edge of both.

One of the temptations of semiology — in part because of its claims to universality and scientific objectivity — has been to take all manifestations of culture as equally worthy of analysis. This tendency is parallelled by the counter-tendency of work originating in the Frankfurt school, and from Lukacs and Gramsci, to see culture as necessarily an aspect of the power structure related to ideology, and therefore inevitably requiring a ranking of significance. The sins of semiology (apart from its anti-historical bias) are absolute relativity and a refusal to offer judgement; the sins of Marxist phenomenology are a disregard of forms of culture which do not fit into a hierarchy of values. Adorno's dismissals of jazz and film are notorious

examples of the latter. One of the inevitable empirical consequences of this dichotomy has been that semiology and structuralism generated a range of studies on newer forms of art (film, rock music, science fiction), while much critical theory has dealt with communication in general, with the ideological nature of literary and art criticism, or with the analysis of classical music and major literary works. In formulating an agenda for the study of contemporary culture we are therefore conscious of the need to explore persistently the Now while at the same time placing it in a context which compels an evaluation with other practices and other dimensions. By pursuing signs we discover anything which is significant; by pursuing value we challenge the significant as not being significant. And yet the persistence of signs — the constant rediscovery of the vitality of human creativity — compels us to test the values of that which we take as eternal. In its gut, marxist critical theory recognized that there is a dilemma that requires solution; in its head, it recognized the alternative posture of mental fracture, that relativity and the absolute are hardly compatible, while the logic of the situation and the meaning of time are contradictory stances brooking no easy solution.

The Russian Revolution showed that the conjunction of the imposition of definitions by a regime with its own objectives could be at variance both with the making sense of the everyday realities by workers and intellectuals alike and with the growth of technological knowledge. In the factories, managers were allowed to be innovative; in the studios artists because of the fear that form might dictate content, were not. The Revolution turned both "formalism" (the empire of Technique) and "futurism" (the worship of Tomorrow) into obscenities. And yet curiously, by so doing it enshrined forever Form as the paramount content and Tomorrow as the Eternal Now.[15]

The heritage of post-Bolshevik Marxism has been to make its own cultural solutions problematic while simultaneously rendering the failure of revolution elsewhere in the Capitalist world a subject for cultural speculation. The tension in cultural analysis has been the need for a definition that will establish our certainties, and equally a recognition that their definition defies our realities.

As Marcuse showed in *Eros and Civilization* this definition of Us denies also the tactile, the sensitive, and the erotic. By institutionalizing the Protestant ethic as theology or by appropriating Fordism as mechanistic solidarity, Russia became the Other that we chose not to inhabit. It became the definition against ourselves. The cultural tension became the struggle for certain boundaries against the infinite possibilities of the sensitive. The boundaries were finally located in the present, in a territory with recognizable order; Israel did much the same thing for Judaism. The struggle for certainty ceased to be universal and became particularistic. The God that we lost in October 1917 was our sense of otherness as a possibility. Instead otherness

became a brute reality. We have wrestled with that other ever since. Religion ceased to be universalistic, as did Marxism, labelled by place and by the fact of its non-achievement of promise. The hopes of most European intellectuals were transferred, because of the social chaos of Western Europe, to the United States, where sensitivity, eroticism and common decency seemed to be kept alive. But at what price! Civilization (destroyed) was translated into culture — a subject for investigation and compartmentalization. Walter Benjamin's refusal to be trucked around North America as a symbol of a decaying civilization has some pathos but also some hope against the process. It was a hope the Europe would not be remade in the American image, or be allowed to degenerate into a Mausoleum of Dead Artifacts, but that it might remake itself out of the ashes of the old.

On these terms we should begin to rethink both the imperialism of the Old World and the hopes of the new. Generally within the past decade or two the Old World has shown itself to be more flexible in adapting external ideas as a redefinition of itself than the New World, which has tended to welcome externals as refugees in order to buttress its self-assurance has been. It is instructive, for example, to consider Edward W. Said's *Orientalism* in this light. The bulk of the book is devoted to the ways that Europeans over several centuries developed the myth of the "Orient" which suited and confirmed their own prejudices of who Arabs, Turks, Persians, Berbers, Kurds, etc. ought to be.

> Orientalism is premised on exteriority, that is on the fact that the Orientalist, poet or scholar, makes the Orient speak, describes the Orient, renders its mysteries plain for and to the West... The exteriority of the representation is always governed by some version of the truism that if the Orient could represent itself it would: since it cannot, the representation does the job, for the West, and *faute de mieux*, for the poor Orient.[16]

This attitude has now been adopted by the United States, which has more investment in the Middle East than anywhere else, and which has the world's most expensively-financed universities devoted to Middle Eastern society and politics. Meanwhile in Europe a concern that Arabs or Iranians should be allowed to speak for themselves is becoming increasingly common and obviously more people are listening to them.

To a certain extent Western Europe may be a rare example where, at an intellectual level, an attempt is made because of the growing belief that culture is a living, ongoing history which requires the outsider as partner, not the

outsider as predator or instrument, at transcending its own history by seeing through its prior impositions. Such a full recognition can probably only come when a territory ceases to be the controller of the destinies of others. But we need not romanticize this process. It is in its infancy and may easily be overturned by other forces. A major intellectual example of its promises, however, is the degree to which the intellectual left, long entrapped by imperialism, is becoming fluidly intenational. In Britain this shift has been developed in part through the Western European Marxism of the *New Left Review* and *Screen* which have simultaneously lifted the British left out of its own parochialism and out of the possibility of being appropriated by the apparchiks of Moscow. Marxism has been released as an indigenous agency.[17] A further, and complimentary, thrust is the attempt, mainly through Birmingham's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, to graft non-positivist French and Italian theories onto British cultural experience and theory in order to unravel the knot of the interconnection between structural processes and cultural practices. The distinction between social structure and culture becomes less a general categorization and more a process in the interpretation of the particular instances encountered.[19] Much of the Birmingham school's work is an elaboration of this simple two-way process, noticed by Marx in the Eighteenth Brumaire, explored in detail by E.P. Thompson in *The Making of the Working Class*,[20] but receiving its most extensive theoretical exploration by Antonio Gramsci and in the more recent writing of the late Nicholas Poulantzas. The impressive element in this work is that it is both extensively theoretical and, in the best tradition of social history, empirical. By being both it is, in the most important sense of the term, action sociology. It becomes a powerful corrective to the armchair theorizing of semiology and also to the directly institutional service sociology and political science of much positivist work.

And yet, there are important problems in appropriating the language of the Other in order to make sense of self. The British New Left often seems like Swinbourne or the Pre-Raphaelites of 100 years ago, imposing a definition from abroad on the rude hamfisted senses of the practical everyday. As E.P. Thompson makes clear in his response to Perry Anderson, the local tradition is alive and well, but we must allow it time to breathe before it is suffocated by the imperialism of external thoughts.[21] The local tradition was never parochial, but always cognisant of other people being in the same place, confronting similar problems. It could never tolerate the idea that the problems of the Other were more important than ours. The work of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies is impressive because of the extent to which the appropriation of non-British theorists and conceptual frameworks are pitted against internal experiences and theorists. The exercise may not always be successful, but the attempt is surely important.

The Centre provides an important case-study in the dilemmas resultant from starting with a sense of "folk culture" and the routine understanding of personal and social experiences — mainly in the work of Richard Hoggart and E.P. Thompson — and then raising questions about the conceptual apparatus available to interpret and connect this experience to the wider society. Works such as *Working Class Culture: Studies in History and Theory* show the evident tension between making sense of social experiences in their own terms and the imposition of theoretical (largely Marxist) frameworks on those experiences. In a critical way this book and the work of the History Workshop [see Raphael Samuel, ed., *People's History and Socialist Theory*] build on the Hoggart-Thompson tradition by developing studies of history and ethnography. As Samuel notes in his editorial preface, "The main thrust of people's history in recent years has been towards the recovery of subjective experience."[22] Against such impressive attempts at archival recovery must be set the other tendency in the Centre's work — to develop a sociology of subcultures in which every theory from Howard Becker to Althusser are ransacked in order to understand such groups as the Skinheads, Mods and Rockers, Communes and Punk. The development of an ethnography of contemporary culture is thus somewhat circumscribed by the theoretical occasions which called the investigations into existence. The tension between the historical work of the Centre and the contemporary is thus delicately maintained. But it also reflects a tension between making sense of marginality as significant towards understanding a central hegemony (as in, for example, the Centre's own study *On Ideology*[23]) and seeing marginality as itself central. For all its faults, *Resistance Through Rituals* is a major attempt to place teenage culture at the centre of the political, and social scene, precisely because "Hegemony . . . is not universal and given to the continuing rule of a particular class. It has to be *won*, worked for, reproduced, sustained,"[24] Youth culture is therefore not simply an appendage of hegemony but an engagement against it, which has to be understood in terms of a society in which "hegemony" had failed to make sense.

> . . . it is difficult to estimate firmly whether the more overt 'attack' on youth was of greater or lesser significance than the tendency, throughout the period as a whole, of the dominant culture to seek and find, in 'youth', the folk-devils to people its nightmare: the nightmare of a society which, in some fundamental way, had lost its sway and authority over its young, which had failed to win their hearts, minds and consent, a society teetering towards 'anarchy', secreting, at its heart, what Mr. Powell so eloquently described as an unseen and nameless

> "Enemy". The whole collapse of hegemonic domination to which this shift from the 1950's to the 1970's bears eloquent witness, was written — etched — in 'youthful' lines.[25]

This debate is not one unique to Britain's "subculture," but one which challenges all the received wisdoms of Marxist scholarship. What if the margin is the only centre of a cultural debate? The punks and the skinheads of Britain need not be invoked to understand that the frenzy of an Adorno against Jazz, the apoplexy of a Cambridge of the 1930's against D.H. Lawrence and F.R. Leavis, or the distrust that Lukacs had of Kafka and James Joyce are part of the same issue. Not only do the forms explode, they explode because of the reality of everyday experience. But they also explode because of a conflict between a sense of social ethics and aesthetic form. Everyday experience — in an hegemonic era be it a technological, capitalist or communist one is truncated by the form of expression. Yet ethics is revealed — and transcended — by a sense of the limitation of form.

The other tension in the work of the Birmingham Centre is that between the search for specifics and that for universals. In one sense the search for universals is always an imposition on our particularities. In another, we match ourselves against *their* universalistic impositions. *Our* particularities — Chekhov's Russia, Dylan Thomas's Wales or Baudelaire's Paris — become the universals of all of us rather than the universalistic impositions. Curiously — but perhaps not — the Birmingham Centre's teasing out of both dimensions reveals its strength. It is an analysis which attempts to expose *their* pecularities against *our* universals. Althusser's sense of what we (logically) are, Gramsci's sense of what we (ontologically) might be, and Richard Hoggart's sense of where we (empirically) start from, are surely important juxtapositions for any investigation of ourselves.

To return to the point made by Said's book, much of our cultural analysis to date has been imperialistic and thus at the expense of others. Most of it remains so, but signs here and there suggest that it need not continue. The search for universals in all knowledge has generally, in cultural analysis, succeeded only in being imperialistic — an imperialism of others, an imperialism by intellectual forms so that we cannot see the others and their experiences, or an imperialism of ethics which dictates what ought to be. All forms are political. Before we can talk sensibly about our societies, we have to free them of the cultural imperialism that inhibits their common vision.

III

But how can this be done in relation to the artifacts of culture, in relation to

cultural genre and in relation to specific human experiences so that they do not in their own way become further examples of "imperial" distortion?

What Said refers to as Orientalism and Imperialism has, of course, been given many terms with different nuances: ideology, hegemony, the signifier. In all cases these terms have been appropriated by those for whom they were made to fit to deny the liberating potential of the critiques that gave rise to them. Ideology was coined by Marx to describe a ruling culture; it was reversed by representatives of ruling cultures to refer to Marxism as an untruth. Such a history of terms need not deter us in employing them; "hegemony" is certainly doing the rounds at present. In looking at literary genres or new communicative forms we should recognize that no form is liberating or enslaving in its own internal logic, but that most have a capacity for changing our sensibilities, subject to the political context appropriating them. The task of a critical theory must first be the ability to apprehend in a technical and social way how a genre functions and contributes to changes in sensibility, while bearing in mind its capacity for change — growth, metamorphosis and decay. As Sontag writes in *On Photography*:

> Humankind lingers unregenerately in Plato's cave, still reveling, its age-old habit, in mere images of the truth. But being educated by older, more artisanal images. For one thing, there are a great many more images around, claiming our attention. The inventory started in 1839 and since then just about everything has been photographed, or so it seems. This very insatiability of the photographing eye changes the terms of confinement in the cave, our world. In teaching us a new visual code, photographs alter and enlarge our notions of what is worth looking at and what we have a right to observe. They are a grammar and, even more importantly, an ethics of seeing. Finally, the most grandiose result of the photographic enterprise is to give us the sense that we can hold the whole world in our heads — as an anthology of images.[26]

But photography is not a self-propelling force and certainly not the self-contained metaphysical world painted by Sontag. If it acts on the world, the world equally acts on it. Photographs are made, cut, framed, printed, thrown away, hung in museums, put alongside news-items of war, used in advertising. Sontag's beautiful essay stresses the general change in our perceptions as a result of the existence of photography as a popular art; she does not address

herself to the particularity of its creation or its distribution, to its political use, nor, more significantly to its particularistic and comparative contexts. Is she really talking about photography everywhere, or just in the romantic Western eye? Can it be that Sontag is committing a new "Orientalism"? "When Cartier-Bresson goes to China, he shows that there are people in China and that they are Chinese."[27] And when Rolof Beny goes to Iran he shows there are people in Iran and they are Iranians? What Chinese? What Iranians? Do not the contexts of taking the photographs and displaying them matter at all?

One of the problems in Sontag's treatment is that of claiming that a genre is inherently liberating. Photography has certainly changed our perception of painting, of time, of spaces, of the written word, of speed. But so has television, or radio, or the phonograph, or the movie picture, or the micro-computer, or the duplicating machine. Books could (and have) been written about all of these forms and their liberating potential, their creativity, their uniqueness, their total revolutionary power. Such writing is often more significant than that emphasizing the instrumentality of any of these forms, their specific uses, and their advantage to business or politics. Such an emphasis crassly attempts to limit the uses of the technology to specific ends. But no one technology in itself has changed or will transform our complete range of sensibilities. The task is to be critically knowing and contextually aware, thus providing a sense of how a genre can aid us on the way to a fuller human sensibility.

The problem of dealing with one genre alone is seen further in much writing on literature, art or music, genres with us for considerably longer than photography. Three approaches in the present decade respond to the knowledge both that the genres have undergone some great "internal" change and to the existence of other competing genres. These are, briefly: (1) That the genre (or a subsection of it) should maintain some sort of essential purity — and considerable discussion from Lukacs to Cleanth Brooks deals with the essence of that purity. (2) That the crisis of the genre is almost without resolution; all possible forms, and perhaps contents, have been exhausted. We are all Dadaists now, or all we can do is to contemplate past literature, music or art as if they were totems of what mattered before the present decay set in. (3) That in response to the existence of other genres, the task of the critic is to display the universality of this particular one by elaborating its codes so that they stand up against the claims of newer forms. Presumably the task of the author, artist or composer is to verify the work of the critic by producing new works for analysis. This need may account for the fact that so many creations are so evidently scholastic.

Critical writing becomes sealed off from the everyday world, a sort of detective fiction of academia. Any attempts by writers such as Raymond Williams to bring it back into context with the idea of culture as experiential

growth are treated with scorn as being 'political', 'social' and 'unacademic' (which surely they are meant to be). Thus most writing on culture is a sign-hunt, a metaphysical distraction from making sense personally and politically. Trapped by its linguistic metaphors, culture becomes a prison-house from which we need escape. The task was never easy, but now the maze seems denser because the frames that bind us seem tighter. Religious distractions increase in part because of the treason of the intellectuals in reifying scholasticism and segmentation just when the road seemed to be opening again.

From the Bolshevik revolution to the present the cultural solution for socialist and conservatives alike was to simplify reality so that it could be explained in a comforting yet ultimately dismissive code. The voices that warn against such simplifications are themselves contradictory, but making sense of them rather than the simplifiers must be the task of critical theorists: Foucault on our re-thinking of the very basic institutions as processes that have shaped our knowledge, Sartre on the tension between individual and political freedom, Benjamin on the conflict between religious hope and secular despair, Gramsci on the structural conditions that seem to make liberation possible as against the cultural paraphenalia that makes it problematic.

Raymond Williams was surely right in his conclusion to *Politics and Letters:*

> I have been pulled all my life, for reasons we've discussed, between simplicity and complexity, and I can still feel the pull both ways. But every argument of experience and of history now makes my decision — and what I hope will be a general decision — clear. It is only in very complex ways that we can truly understand where we are. It is only in very complex ways, and by moving confidently towards very complex societies, that we can defeat imperialism and capitalism and begin that construction of many socialisms which will liberate and draw upon our real and now threatened energies.[28]

But we must be equally aware of the dangers of producing a new Marxist scholasticism which finally locks us into a conceptual Prison House of Culture.

IV

This article commenced with somewhat critical comments both on the

formalist intellectuals who saw culture as the self-contained interpretation of texts and on Lenin's equation of culture with party organization. And yet both were part of the same exploration. It was to the disadvantage of the Revolution that they could not feed each other. A reflexive theory, which was surely the intent of both the formalists and futurists, would have been enriched by a sense of social involvement which, in spite of Mayakovski, was not granted scope by a party viewing consolidation as more important than exploration. The containment of cultural analysis through linguistics may have subsequently enriched our vocabulary, and even our perception of practices, but it has done little to advance a sense of culture as committed political practice. We seem to know where we are, but are uncertain how to advance, or what alternative strategies we have available to cope with structures and processes that move on in spite of ourselves.

The reviews are definitions against which we have to formulate a language which will save us from an Orientalism of the occident. They demand a response. Unequivocally, they are connected with some of the universals that impose themselves on us. Our habitat is the media, the genre in which we choose to place ourselves or in which we are placed by their imposition. They are chosen (out of many others) because of their sense that alternatives are important. One (by Pamela McCallum on Raymond Williams) is about constructing theory out of experience: another by Robert Kett is on the important work of Pierre Bourdieu as a total re-definition of culture as praxis. The others are about situations and genre, and attempts at social transcendance from the forms while recognizing that the forms themselves give us clues to the boundaries that involve the sense of transcendance. The parameters impose the language of escape: the problematic of lived through reality forces us to confront our entrapment.

Some of these reviews are brief — time is short and analysis does not necessarily wait for lengthy expositions when the issue can be stated succinctly in a form which is ready-made, like a Sonnet, to be exploded. Others are longer; the meanderings of thought often require the flow of a stream to lead from one source to another.

Sometimes the form implodes. We need the implosion to recognize the relevance and limitations of the form. These reviews are dedicated to the principle that there is more to culture than the imposition of constraints. There are limitations to be overcome. The metaphors are useful only when we recognize that they are misguided and have to be conquered. A film is a film? We may misread it if we use linguistics alone. We may not read it at all if we don't encounter linguistic metaphors. The tension between social experience and theory is one that must be maintained; to retreat into one or the other forever traps us. These reviews demonstrate attempts to free us from that entrapment.

The reviews are therefore part of an exploration that defines culture both as a lived-through experience and also as a coming to terms with imposed artifacts — whether they are theories of films, painting, music, institutions, or ideology. In some respects the reviews might be seen as a debate with structuralist-derived critiques in order to reformulate them. The question about structuralism and semiology is whether a formulation which Saussure saw as appropriate to stress the uniqueness of language may distort our understanding when transferred to some other aspect of human behaviour. Timpanaro is surely correct in observing

> that according to Saussure various other branches of knowledge will enter *in part and by approximation* into the future semiological science, but that only linguistics, accompanied at most by the study of writing and sign systems in the strict sense, has a full claim to belong to it . . . He is very far from attempting a reduction of all reality to language, or to a system in a formlistic sense. Rather, he senses very strongly the non-conventionality (i.e. the lesser conventionality) of everything in life and human society which is not language."[29]

To see how theoretical analogy provides a substitute for not making theory becomes easy. Instead of establishing the grounds for theorizing about art or films or becoming a punk rocker we impose an embryonic theory about language to see whether it 'fits' the new phenomenon. An extreme way of justifying this approach is stated in postulating a theory of art by McHugh, Raffel, Foss and Blum:

> Art is what it is. Unlike science, art realizes the concrete by showing itself as itself — as its sufficient source and ground — without turning away to sources (things) that are external. Art is far from the things it can be seen as imitating because in producing itself art replaces what it imitates. Art's realness is grounded in its freedom from what it imitates because its very capacity to imitate, which is its productivity, constitutes it superiority.[30]

The problem with such an analysis — attractive though it is in allowing an automonous language for particular practices — is that it hinges on comparisons with other activities in order to show uniqueness, rather than in

seeing practice as part of an interconnecting dynamic. If the only real analysis of art is to do it, then the practice of the totality becomes impossible. Analysis is a collection of ideally typified but discrete practices that have no connections with each other either substantially or analytically. Structuralism and semiology, by imposing a connectedness, if only by analogical patterning, essentially seek for that connection. Analysis, in spite of its claim to providing autonomous theories imposes unity through form of discourse: "Other is that which organizes and grounds the idea of analytical interest . . . it is an affirmation which transcends sheer relativism because it is backed by a commitment that is external to the things we analyse, and external to those particular analyses. It is our form."[31] Commitment is directed towards understanding Other in its own terms. But it is also a commitment to Other (not others) as a point of discourse. Not surprisingly, therefore, the point at which *we* stand is never disclosed. We become Other. The methodology of analysis makes us mute against Other's certainty.

The reviews that follow are therefore torn between the need to go beyond structuralism's attempt at connectedness through the imposition of form and a phenomenological analysis which tries to derive form from practice itself. In an encounter with interpretations of certain genres, as well as interpretations of interrelated practices, the reviewers consider such questions as whether the semiology of film tells us anything about film and ourselves which we could not glean from direct observation, whether the structuralist interpretation of music is a hindrance or help to making sense of music's social presence, and whether literature in its own terms or literature in semiological terms are necessarily antagonistic concepts when considered as part of our wider cultural practice. Ultimately, social interpretations of culture are questions of the relationships between artifacts (documents, texts, music, sculpture and so on) and the contexts in which they are received and produced.

> The social process of culture takes place not within texts but between texts, and between texts and readers: not some ideal, disembodied reader, but historically concrete readers whose act of reading is conditioned, in part by the text it is true, but also by the whole ensemble of ideological relationships which bear upon the incessant production and reproduction of the texts.[32]

In a certain sense structuralism, semiology, hermeneutical analysis and a marxist critical theory ask the right questions but pose in a distorted context. "Who are the signifiers and whom do they signify?" is an important question, but so is "what happens when the signified signifies the signifier?" The attempt at specifying a series of cognitive ideal types, characteristic of analytic

thinking[33] would have some heuristic value if only we know what wider sociological — as opposed to metaphysical — problematic it was seeking to address. The difficulty in both cases reflects a failure to locate the search for meanings in relation to specific situations and institutions and is also a failure, in the last resort, to distinguish between meanings as meta-language and meaning as that which is produced by the active practice of subjects.[34]

The study of cultural practices over the past decade is in many respects therefore an examination of meaning, but also of perception and action. Much of the work has been conducted in discussion at a general theoretical level and much of that which is specific has based itself on the interpretation of documents, cultural artifacts, and cultural performances. The vantage points from which these investigations have been conducted range from attempts to explore particular genre (as indicated below in the reviews of the film criticism of Christian Metz and the literary criticism of Gerald Graf) to attempts to map out the interconnecting patterns of the culture of a whole society (the work of the Birmingham Centre and Pierre Bourdieu's Centre for European Society are the most comprehensive examples.) From whatever perspective, and with whatever theoretical equipment, cultural analysis has made serious inroads into the traditional preserves of other disciplines by exposing the hidden dimensions of practices and institution, and by calling into question concepts which, though subject to debate, have been integral parts of social theorizing for over a hundred years. Terms such as class, structure, ideology, stratification, function, polity, society, imitation, literature, language can never be used again without some sense of their abuse. But if the advent of cultural theorizing had achieved only *that* insight, it would have achieved only the rewriting of our dictionaries, thus locking us into the nostalgia of remembrance. The reviews that follow do more.

The following problems remain: Culture can be seen as a lived-through experience which we feel we have to interpret in order to understand *their* experiences against *ours* (what the sociologists would describe as inter-subjective experiences); culture can be codified as an independent, structured sense of *otherness*, in which we have no direct control part but containing parts which inform all of our everyday lives; or culture is the experience of coming to terms with either metaphysical or secular alternatives. None of these visions really work alone. Culture, as Harold Bloom or Walter Benjamin have argued is concerned with *mis*understanding the Other and deliberately *mis*reading "Them" into another reality. In other words, culture is related to creative fantasy. If the language of culture is based on an escape route from reality, the escape from *that* entrapment is into a reality which allows us to confront fantasy as part of the everyday. This point does not mean that we should treat novels, films, paintings, sculptures, graffitti, notes, folk songs or autobiographies as objects that have to be distanced through a structured theory, but rather that we should see them for what they are — and were

meant to be — aspects of ourselves, forms in which we rediscover our lives and personalities. Hell may well be the other, as Sartre said at the end of *Huis Clos*. It is also ourselves. Culture is probably the understanding of that what *they* made of us may be remade by *us* into our own subjective and transcendental sense of *them*. Our escape from that Prison-House is to recognize that we are the ones who have to transcend the structures. Pierre Bourdieu is surely correct. Our determination confronts the structure's determinism. If we understand the structure we might liberate ourselves. If we take the structure as the only term of reference we will forever be trapped.

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Notes

1. Sheila Fitzpatrick: *The Commissariat of Enlightenment*, Soviet Organization of Education and the Arts under Lunacharsky, Cambridge University Press, 1970, p. 107.
2. These years are summarized well in the haunting woods of Roman Jacobson:
   > We strained toward the future too impetuously and avidly to leave any past behind us. The links in the chain of time were broken. We lived too much in the future, thought about it, believed in it; the self-generating evils of the day did not exist for us. We lost a sense of the present. We were the witnesses and participants in the great socialist, scientific, and other such cataclysms . . . Like the splendid hyperbole of the young Mayakovsky, 'the other foot was still running along a side street.' We knew that the thoughts of our fathers were already in discord with their surroundings. We read harsh the hire of the old, unventilated commonplaces. But our fathers still had remnants of faith in their convenience and social utility. To their children was left a single, naked hatred for the ever more threadbare, ever more alien castoffs of the vulgar reality . . . "The Generation that Squandered its Poets," reprinted in Jacques Ehrmann: *Literature and Revolution*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1967, pp. 124-5.
3. Stalin, *Marxism and Linguistics*, New York: 1951 quoted in Frederic Jameson *The Prison House of Language*, Princeton University Press, 1972, p. 211.
4. Leon Trotski, *Literature and Revolution*, New York: Russell & Russell, 1957, p. 172.
5. Leon Trotski, *History of the Russian Revolution*, London: Victor Gollancz, 1934, p. 36.
6. Ernest Gellner, *The Legitimation of Belief*, London: Cambridge University Press, 1974, p. 203.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 203.
8. Jameson, p. 216.
9. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, London: Paladin, 1973, p. 111.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 112.
11. Eric Partridge, *A Dictionary of Historical Slang*, Harmondsworth; Penguin Books, 1972.
12. Tony Bennett in *Formalism and Marxism*, London: Methuen, 1979 tries to reclaim

Formalism by grafting in onto post-Althusserian Marxism as a Marxist science of culture. This important task is, however, restricted by a refusal to consider any hermeneutical or interpretative social theory.

In his book *On Materialism*, Sebastiano Timpanaro, London: Versa, 1976, has a plausible stab at structuralism but, ultimately, on the grounds that it is not sufficiently scientific. Again, he writes as if the work of the existentialists, phenomenologists and hermeneuticists were of no consequence. Indeed their work is consigned to the limbo of idealism. The model that Timpanaro seems closest to endorsing is that of the linguistic behaviourism of Bloomfield.

13. Gellner, p. 205-6.

14. A.J. Greimas, quoted in Jameson, *The Prison House of Language*, p. 216.

15. For an elaboration, see the present author's "Knowledge, Education and Power" in R. Brown (ed.), *Knowledge, Education and Cultural Change*, London: Tavistock Press, 1972.

16. Edward M. Said, *Orientalism*, New York: Vintage Books, 1979, pp. 20-21.

17. And this must be said in spite of E.P. Thompson's opinion to the contrary. His *Poverty of Theory*, London: Merlin Press, 1978 is obsessed with theory as limitation of others. On the contrary, Thompson as a Theorist seems to treat Historical Metaphor as Truth. See Perry Anderson, *Arguments within English Marxism*, London: Verso Editions, 1980.

18. Probably the major theoretical and empirical observation here is Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson, eds., *Resistance through Rituals*, London: Hutchinson, 1976.

20. E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, London: Gollancz, 1960.

21. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory*.

22. John Clarke, Charles Critcher and Richard Johnson, (eds.) *Working Class Culture: Studies in History and Theory*, London: Hutchinson, 1979; and Hall and Jefferson, *op cit.* See also my forthcoming study, "Structuralism and Critical Sociology in Britain" in John Fekete (ed) *The Structuralist Myth*. Raphael Samuel (ed.) *People's History and Socialist Theory*, London: Routledge, 1980, p. xviii.

23. Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, *On Ideology*, London: Hutchinson, 1978.

24. Hall and Jefferson (eds.), p. 40.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 74.

26. Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, New York: Delta Books, 1973, p. 3.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 111.

28. Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters*, London: New Left Books, 1979, p. 437.

29. Timpanaro, pp. 157-8.

30. Peter McHugh, Stanley Raffel, Daniel C. Foss, Alan Blum, *On the Beginnings of Social Enquiry*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974, pp. 160-161.

31. McHugh et al., p. 182.

32. Bennett, p. 174.

33. Further examples are found in *Maieutics*, Vol. 1, No. 1, Spring 1980 which includes a discussion by A. Blum and P. McHugh, pp. 136-144 on Irony, Comedy, etc. as ideal types. What this does, in effect, is to treat them as personifications — "Irony enjoys itself" and so forth. The whole project, we are told, is directed at "raising the problem of whether and how we may collectively change ourselves." (p. 3). Not even Plato was quite so idealistic.

34. For an elaboration of this argument see Anthony Giddens, *New Rules of Sociological Method*, London: Hutchinson, 1976.