Babette Hellemans

Understanding Culture

A Handbook for Students in the Humanities

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Introduction

This textbook is intended as an aid — nothing more, nothing less — to the broad field of research known as culture. It does not pretend to be a comprehensive work on the subject: there are, after all, much better media (including the Internet) available to look up facts and definitions. What, then, is the purpose of this book? The aim is to provide guidance and to outline the different perspectives on culture in the humanities. Long before it became a field of academic research, the concept of culture was surrounded by an aura of ambiguity. If one tried to defend the field of research dealing with culture, such an effort quickly degenerated into a clumsy inability to describe a single well-defined and defining method. And as in any controversy, the conflict revolves primarily around the conceptual framework of culture and therefore is about reputation, academic traditions in different countries, and the use of source material (written sources; visual sources in art and architecture, and landscape architecture; archaeological excavations). Moreover, the debates on culture are so diverse that it is difficult to get a handle on what culture is. Unlike in the field of history in which the concept of 'truth' and the 'reliability' of one's sources play a key role, the practice of cultural studies seems to be characterised by something approaching indifference to the quest for the truth.

Nevertheless, there is an academic discussion — one could even say a fierce debate — about the essence of culture, a discussion that is focused on our use of language in relation to the interpretation of imagery . The debate is essentially epistemological in nature (from the Greek word *episteme* (ἐπιστήμη), which means knowledge) and focuses on the nature and possibility of acquiring knowledge about culture. When such important concepts as truth and reliability are called into question in the broader field of the humanities — similar to the concept of gravity or the theory of evolution in science — the temptation is to design a theory in an attempt to manage the total chaos. There is a veritable industry of theory books that focus on the fields of culture, language, religion, memory, and art. This turn to theory can partly be explained by the rise of postmodernism — and literary criticism in its wake — and the different opinions regarding an unbiased interpretation of culture, precisely when such an unbiased interpretation is difficult to establish due to a significant time dimension, the foreignness of the culture, or the existence of power relations and the inability of members of a subculture (such as women, homosexuals or the illiterate) to express themselves.

This book discusses the development of theories within cultural studies in detail, but I would note here that the tendency to use abstract models sometimes has the same effect as the emperor's new clothes: no one will dare to come forward and say that the theoretical model is nothing more than common sense. Perhaps to counter this effect, a pragmatic approach is increasingly gaining ground in the field of cultural studies. Increasingly, the attempt to grasp the notion of culture on a conceptual basis is being replaced by the *application* of culture as an epistemological phenomenon. What is the knowledge value of culture in a society? What are the socio-economic effects of a cultural sector? Although this practical response to all the theoretical musings is understandable, it would constitute an act of destruction if we no longer made the effort to understand why the thinkers who are central to this book had an important point when they attempted to design an academic approach to culture. As the famous British art critic and essayist John Berger (1926-2017) wrote in his poem *Labour Monthly*:

> Men go backwards or forwards.
> There are two directions
> But not two sides.[1]

All the differences between disciplines and geographical traditions aside, what acts as a uniting factor within cultural studies is its exceptional ability to integrate and incorporate, time and again, new influences that define the concept of culture. This academic process is therefore never finished: due to the emergence of new media, it is always future-oriented, and when one looks back on the history of academia, one would notice a significant degree of vitality.

Trajectory or Tradition?

More than a hundred years ago, academics at universities began to examine the idea of culture in an analytical, systematic way. Because culture can be said to act as a mirror of our worldview, this image is constantly changing. Culture, therefore, has its own history. In addition, as a result of various events in the twentieth century, radical changes in the way we value culture, including the attachment of moral judgements, (deeply) impacted its study.

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1   John Berger, *Selected Essays* (New York, 2001), p. xi.

The globalisation of knowledge has also had a major impact on the study of culture. Until the 1960s and 1970s, culture was primarily associated with one specific civilisation, tradition, or linguistic area, and the Anglo-Saxon, French, and German cultural areas in particular were dominant. These worlds were often separated from each other academically, which meant that books written by colleagues were not always read in all languages. To this day, cultural studies remain very much confined to specific geographic areas. However, this segregation of academic traditions is now rapidly subsiding. The emergence of various cultures that do not belong to the traditions of the 'Old World' obliges us to revise our view of culture itself. And yet most textbooks on culture still describe the phenomenon from one specific academic tradition. This textbook will deviate slightly from this traditional stance by introducing students to a study of culture as a concept on its *own* terms with the help of methods from various traditions and by emphasising the historical origins of culture as a discipline.

Finally, since this book explicitly aims to describe the concept of culture to students from different countries and backgrounds, it behooves me to clarify its shortcomings. How on earth is it possible for us to break away from academic tradition and theory, which developed its initial **discourse** on the basis of a Eurocentric or Western perspective, when we are trying to understand the history of the discipline from that very tradition? Is it not the case that all the major thinkers belong precisely to that tradition from which we are trying to break away? This problem cannot be readily solved. But I do think it is possible for us to move one step forward by breaking away from the self-defeating assumption that theory or cultural criticism is an elitist affair per se.

In his book *The Location of Culture*, the Indian-American cultural theorist Homi Bhabha (1949-) questions whether polarisation need be a precondition for a polemic. Given that we would then forever be doomed to **binarity** and that freedom of knowledge will remain locked in antitheses, we must ask ourselves whether it is possible to approach the concept of culture without a specific political agenda. Wouldn't it be nice to study culture in and of itself instead of constantly having to stress its applicability or identifiability? This emphasis on aestheticism and idealism can, of course, be labelled as typically bourgeois and self-satisfied. But I would point out that the alternative — militant rhetoric, political engagement, and social criticism — also poses a great danger. Doesn't the omnipresence of popular media, with its own economic and political agenda, pose at least as great a threat to the survival of a diversity of cultures?

Material Culture

The idea that culture is a matter of taste with degrees of appreciation, that can be structured by aesthetical judgments, has been lost long ago. But what culture does in fact mean is not always clear. We can approach the subject in a roundabout way by using a concept that is often placed alongside culture: nature. This will allow us to see how complex the concept of culture is. An example of this nature-culture dichotomy is the gazebo bird that lives in New Guinea and Australia. For years, the bird will work on building its domed nest on the ground. With great precision, this nest will be decorated with flowers, seeds, leaves, and feathers. Everything that the bird collects is sorted by colour and shape, and none of the nests are similar. Not only does each nest have a recognisable style of decoration and colour — one bird uses blue colours, the other red berries and flowers, and a third makes use of a variety of yellow hues — but we also see how the different shades of colours are coordinated with the finesse of a highly paid interior designer. Those who have seen this bird in a nature documentary or perhaps with their own eyes may ask themselves what is left of that intuitive boundary we believe we can identify between Nature and Culture, let alone the boundaries between Culture, Nature, and Art. If this problem already applies to a tropical bird, then certainly it would apply to humans?

One answer may be that humans, unlike animals, make *things*: pots and teacups, mirrors and combs, Coca-Cola bottles and shoes, paintings and sculptures. On this list are isolated objects that can only be understood through *context*, so that we can highlight the difference between culture and nature. But these objects, which themselves impart an experience without having any need for language, not only represent what people make, use, and throw away; they allow us to understand that objects are an integral part of the human experience and that therefore understanding these 'things' is in itself a complex undertaking. William David Kingery (1926-2000), who first developed a system on the basis of materiality — in his case, ceramics — described the complexity of 'reading things' as follows:

> No one denies the importance of things, but learning from them requires rather more attention than reading texts. The grammar of things is related to, but more complex and difficult to decipher than, the grammar of words. Artifacts are tools as well as signals, signs and symbols. Their use and functions are multiple and intertwined. Much of their meaning

is subliminal and unconscious. Some authors have talked about reading objects as texts, but objects must also be read as myths and as poetry.[2]

The quote above illustrates how important it is to have a multifaceted interpretation of culture when it is compressed into an object. Indeed, the boundary between object and culture is blurred, as the interpretation of an object coincides with the culture that produced it. This recognition of complexity has meant that, since 2010, academics also refer to a *material turn* in the humanities, a movement that is closely related to a broader *cultural turn* which focused on language as the basis of all human experience. However, for the theme of this book, which examines the concept of culture in a broader sense, we will have to take more than objects into consideration. The exercise becomes more difficult when we want to add to the subjects we are dealing with such abstract concepts as the Renaissance, the Industrial Revolution, or decolonisation. Yet both aspects — subjects and concepts — are interlinked. For example, if we associate the round Coca-Cola bottle as a result of the Industrial Revolution, we see the red and white bottle as an icon of a particular period in history. However, there is also a way to connect subjects and concepts to each other by placing them *outside* of history.

Disciplines such as **sociology**, archaeology, or **anthropology** have developed methods by which objects, buildings, and other material objects are studied independently and as stand-alone objects. This quest to immediately understand a cultural object and to develop methods for doing so — referred to as cultural relativism — is perhaps one of the trickiest puzzles in the field. A good example of cultural relativism was in the *Musée du Quai Branly* in Paris at the *Fabrique des images* exhibition between 2010 and 2011. In the text that accompanied the exhibition, it was explained that

The aim of the exhibition is to show what it cannot directly show in a picture: namely, what effect those who have made [the image] wanted to achieve for those whom the images were intended. In some cases, these effects are still visible beyond the centuries and the cultural differences. Provided that the images are recognisable, very old or distant images can evoke longing, fear, revulsion, empathy, amusement, or even quite simply our curiosity. Usually, however, these effects are not noticed because

2   David Kingery, 'Introduction', in W. David Kingery, Learning from Things (ed.): Method and Theory of Material Culture Studies (Washington and London, 1996), p. 1.

the conventions that led to the image taking shape remain unclear to
visitors of a 21st-century museum who are chiefly used to the tradition
of Western art.[3]

Studying objects of culture directly as they reveal themselves to us in
the world today and without any historical context leads to new ways of
interpretation and new structures. Examples of such new structures are the
naturalistic depiction of objects (e.g. the humanist ideal of the Renaissance)
or the animalistic depiction of the cosmos in which humans, animals, and
plants belong to a whole (e.g. in African art or in totem poles). When these
structures are placed next to each other in the form of objects, we can obtain
interesting insights into the underlying culture. By restructuring objects,
researchers have the immediate possibility of making contact with other
worlds and other eras. We will gradually see these two aspects — the direct
presence and the historicising presence of culture — as threads that are
intertwined when we study the phenomenon of culture.

Cultural Criticism

The question remains why we should concern ourselves with a 'critique'
of 'culture'. Is it really worth it? Will all these abstract concepts really
add anything to what you already observe around you in a natural way
in literature, art, or reality? This underlying doubt also reveals the dual
problem behind 'cultural studies'. First, there is the fact that you initially
might not completely understand certain abstract concepts, although with
a little perseverance (for example, by looking up specific words or names),
that obstacle can be overcome.

The second problem is by far the most intractable: the hesitation to study
a theory of culture can be based on the fear that you will lose a form of
intimacy with your own world whenever you read, observe, or listen. It is
as though after reading a book on (or obtaining a degree in) cultural studies
or cultural history, you will never again be able to enjoy a book, music, or
movies in a relaxing manner but will always hear that voice of cultural
criticism. And let's be honest: this fear is not entirely unfounded. Because
cultural criticism is still such a young addition to the family of academia,
one that has only recently started growing, 'culture' as a subject of study is
not yet fully crystallised.

3   *La Lettre du Collège de France* No. 28, Paris, Collège de France, April 2010, p. 13.

When the 'death of the author' was proclaimed in literature studies in the 1980s, what was meant by this was that there is a significant — even insurmountable — distance between the writer as the author of a story and the text that is to be interpreted. In this view, it is strictly the text itself that should be studied — the contextualisation of the author or the period in which the work was created is not necessary. This view is directly opposed to the way in which literature, painting, and music were considered in the early twentieth century. Back then, the most important goal was to situate the created work in the life of the artist. This would allow us to understand the message of the work or the 'moral intention' of the creator, or so it was thought. Incidentally, this traditional approach lives on in the form of a strong interest in the genre of biography.

In later years, more and more emphasis came to be placed on the inter-preter — the reader, the viewer, the listener — and the author became a side issue. We will explore this in more detail in the final chapter. Today, we are in a phase in which a middle position is sought, with research primarily focused on concepts that are often derived from postcolonial theory formation or gender studies such as hybridity, diversity, and imita-tion (mimicry).

That fact and fiction in history need not be opposites became clear in the most traumatic way in the course of the twentieth century. The Holocaust and the global political upheavals as a result of the traumatic events during the during the colonisation and Western imperialism made more and more scholars realise that sometimes reality can surpass our worst collective nightmares. The unthinkable — genocide — had become reality. The blurring of the divide between fact and fiction also holds true in a positive sense, of course: a trip to the moon is no longer a fairy tale. As a result of these profound experiences, what has emerged is a collective realisation that history is less a linear path of progress and more like a roller coaster; that we can plummet in humanitarian terms to below the level of the ape-man and that, twenty years later, we can make our greatest dreams come true. So once again the question arises: why do humans need a 'critique' of culture? Is it because we still believe we can be distinguished from a tropical bird, one that — just like us — likes to keep himself busy decorating his house with knickknacks?

Studying culture may be in fashion, but often we don't know what it is all about. This is partly because culture has become a catch-all term that encompasses all forms of art, music, or literature. But what is also part of cultural studies is the study of certain social groups — high culture versus low culture, for example — or the disadvantaged position

of women compared to men in history (***gender studies***) and the LGBT movement (*queer studies*). Another component of cultural studies is the examination of Western hegemony versus the history of the East (Orientalism). And what about media studies and communication studies? These two disciplines are significantly influencing cultural theory and cultural history with their focus on visual culture or the changes in social behaviour in the history of communication — from the quill to the mobile phone.

It may seem as though the terms 'cultural history', 'cultural studies', and *cultural theory* can be used interchangeably. The various terms that are used say a lot about the dichotomy that has arisen in the history of thought between the Anglo-Saxon analytical tradition and the so-called 'continental tradition': the United States and the British Empire versus France and Germany — though the latter two countries have developed a very different philosophical approach that has spawned followers in other parts of the world. We shall return to this topic later. For now, suffice it to say that many of the misconceptions about 'cultural theory' rest on this dichotomy, because the Anglo-Saxon and the continental tradition differ significantly from each other both in terms of the terminology they use and the way they look at reality. Hopefully this has removed much of the hesitation the reader may have felt towards abstract theory and has aroused their curiosity. After all, some knowledge of theory does lead you to see your world through a new pair of glasses.

Bureaucracy and Civilisation

We have already mentioned briefly the significant impact that the Second World War has had in the way the West perceived its own civilisation. In retrospect, there were already several indications before the war that Western civilisation was about to embark on a radically different course. In the early twentieth century, modernism had already led to criticism of the nineteenth-century ideal of ***Bildung***, which posited that people could 'cultivate' themselves into a better version of themselves. Modernists challenged the old visual language of art by no longer taking figurative art, which was based on a perception of reality, as a starting point.

These two developments — modernism and the legacy of *Bildung* — occurred synchronously. It therefore seems almost inconceivable that the work of French sculptor August Rodin — thoroughly nineteenth century in form and expression — was made in the same time period as that of the

radical sculptor Constantin Brancusi. Brancusi, who became famous for his 'eggs' of marble, had even initially worked in Rodin's studio in Paris. In the same vein, in modernist literature, the Irish writer James Joyce played around with phrases by putting more emphasis on sounds and word experimentation than on the grammatical and substantive consistency of a sentence. Joyce's *Ulysses* even turned the whole structure of the novel on its head so that the fabricated notion of a 'logical progression' — a plot — was absent in his work. And in Germany, the avant-garde of the art world during the Weimar Republic was incredibly innovative in their criticism of the manufacturability of man.

Because the Second World War was to play such a dominant role in the emergence of cultural pessimism and a deep cynicism about the idea of civilisation, we often underestimate the extent to which the perfectibility of man and culture was challenged in the most phenomenal manner in the Weimar Republic. There are plenty of examples of this: androgynous ideals of beauty with cigar-smoking women à la Marlene Dietrich; Bertolt Brecht's plays; the opera *Lulu* by Alban Berg; compositions with atonal music; and, of course, cubism and expressionism in the visual arts, which later came to be referred to by the Nazis as *Entartete Kunst* — degenerate art. In any event, the Second World War marked a watershed in the way we define culture and civilisation.

One of the political and cultural consequences of this post-war period of reflection was the founding of the United Nations, which established a separate organisation for culture and science: the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). The establishment of an international cultural institution had far-reaching consequences for the way countries gave shape to their new cultural policy, whose purpose included rebuilding a Europe badly damaged by the war. In this regard, it is interesting to quote the radio speech by the British Minister of Education Ellen Wilkinson on the occasion of the founding of UNESCO in 1945. In her speech, Wilkinson argues how culture can be used as ideological medicine against war and violence. The tone is somewhat grandiloquent by our current standards, but we would do well to remind ourselves that this speech was given at a time when mankind was shrouded in the dark mists of the most terrible events in history:

> Now we are met together: workers in education, in research and in the varied fields of culture. We represent those who teach, those who discover, those who write, those who express their inspiration in music or in art. We have a high responsibility, for entrusted to us is the task of creating

some part — and not the least important part — of that structure of the United Nations on which rests our hope for the future of mankind. It is for us to clear the channels through which may flow from nation to nation the streams of knowledge and thought, of truth and beauty which are the foundations of true civilization.

We live in a machine age, and the world has worshiped at the shrine of the practical man and of technological achievement. But we know that progress as machine users can lead only to disaster unless we also have progress as human beings. Behind the machine, and vastly more important, is man and the mind of man. It is indeed the mind of man — the right-mindedness of man — which alone can prevent the misuse of the new powers always coming to his hand. Civilization, it has been said, represents the conquest of nature. But surely it must also depend on the development of all that is best in human nature.

Lastly, we have the word Culture. Some may argue that the artist, the musician, the writer, all the creative workers in the humanities and the arts, cannot be organized either nationally or internationally. But those of us who remember the struggle in the Far East and in Europe in the days preceding the open war, know how much the fight against fascism depended on the determination of writers and artists to keep their international contacts that they might reach across the rapidly rising frontier barriers. [...] Our international organization [UNESCO], intended to be a bridge between nations, must rest firmly on foundations dug deeply into the national life and tradition of the member states.[4]

The message is that 'culture' can no longer be non-committal but should be part of an offensive to civilise man in order to counterbalance our machine-worshipping, warmongering nature. A pedantic 'finger' is clearly at work here, and history shows just such a 'finger' popping up in the debate on culture. Cultural *historians* spend much of their time delving into this changeability of moral connotations.

Wilkinson's speech also suggests that the concept of culture is tied to the concept of civilisation. This etymological kinship is clearly reflected in certain languages, notably English and French (*civilisation*) and German

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4   In: *60 Women Contributing to the 60 years of UNESCO — Constructing the Foundations of Peace*, under the direction of Ingeborg Breines (Geneva, 2006), pp. 15-19.

Moai, Rano Raraku, Easter Island

(*Zivilisation*). In a narrower sense of the word 'culture' — as capital of acquired knowledge — the word originated from the Latin *colere*, which means to 'grow' or 'cultivate'. Just as the farmer cultivates his field, so too the cultivated man works on nurturing and harvesting the mind. Culture, therefore, was initially a word that referred to agriculture. The Roman orator Marcus Tullius Cicero (106-43BC) is one of the first who gave this originally

agricultural word an intellectual meaning. Throughout the history of the West, this Greco-Roman interpretation has been passed down via medieval monasteries, schools, and universities. Cultivating the mind was a private matter, from the humanist ideal of the Renaissance all the way up to and including the nineteenth-century German tradition of *Bildung*.

This brings us back to the speech by the British minister. The ideal of a universal civilisation is a theme that one comes across in many final exams and policy papers, but there are those who contend that the word leaves a bad aftertaste in one's mouth. This is because civilisation seems to pertain to the elite who know 'how things should be' or to those who view the diversity of cultural influences from a certain political correctness — in short, holders of what the French philosopher Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002) referred to as *symbolic capital*. Can we accept the fact that the definition of culture will *always* have a certain degree of ambiguity, a duality that cannot be resolved, and that the concept will always be contextual? This is what we will gradually discover in this book. The elastic versatility of meanings around the word 'culture' do not make it any easier, and yet it *is* possible to demarcate culture as a subject of academic study. We shall simply have to carry on digging.

We use the word culture in the most elastic sense of the term as the sum of the collective **representations** associated with a particular society. Each of these terms could be the subject of a chapter of its own. The 'total character' of culture can be interpreted mathematically as a sum of all the features. However, the definition also shows that culture is about something quite different, namely *representation*. This emphasis on the whole — we call this the '**holistic** aspect' — characterises all academic disciplines that deal with culture. If the object of study for the historian, the anthropologist, the sociologist, or the philosopher is *culture*, they will always strive to examine the *complete picture*. The creator of the concept of 'collective representation' is Émile Durkheim (1858-1917), the father of sociology. With this concept, Durkheim tried to emphasise a collectively formulated identity. In his 1912 work, *Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*, collective representations are described by means of rituals and conventions. Durkheim shows that these practices have an autonomous function within a culture and thus transcend the individual. An advantage of Durkheim's approach is that through **representation** the researcher can create two mental forms of distance to culture: a *spatial distance* (geography) and a *temporal distance* (history). By formulating these two distances a priori, the researcher can place, as it were, the culture s/he is studying back into the created space and time, thereby allowing a culture to be represented in all its facets. Seen

in this way, collective representation appears to be primarily an *intuitive* representation of culture and, as a result, the concept is by definition confined — not confined in the sense of limited but rather in the recognition of a degree of demarcation. This demarcation shows nothing more (and nothing less) than the awareness that it is simply never entirely possible to give a purely rational representation — the sum of all factors — of a culture.

This reflection is of paramount importance for cultural historians, given that the temporal distance relative to the object being studied is often so considerable that one's view of the culture is severely obscured. In addition, certain values have become so alien to us that they are difficult to imagine. Even in the case of historians and philosophers specialised in the study of contemporary society, the observer is only able to make reconstructions and analyses after the fact. In other words, the depiction of a culture becomes visible only gradually as one studies and collates accumulated customs into a meaning that steadily grows, allowing even such a thing as 'the behaviour of institutions' to be studied via the images, sounds, colours, and concepts that these institutions use. You could argue that an analytical study of today can only be produced tomorrow. That is what Durkheim was driving at with his emphasis on the representation of culture.

And yet the question of what precisely distinguishes a researcher of 'culture' from the biologist who studies animal behaviour remains. And here we come back to the example of the tropical bird. The term 'cognition' is often reserved for neurophysiologists, psychologists, or cognitive scientists, who also commonly use the term **representation**. From a cultural perspective, representation is not about a hypothetical notion which has to initially be a product of the mind in order to be analysed as an object of society. In other words, for the cultural historian or cultural philosopher, the point is not to describe a cultural object as a product of the mind, as is the case with neuroscience, but as an object (artifact) of a society, whether we are dealing with a song, a Persian carpet, a Rembrandt painting, a philosophical treatise, or a football game...

There is, however, a problem. What do you do when you don't have any form of representation because the object, the recording, or the text reflecting the culture is not available? Perhaps it has gone missing, and you know from other sources that it did exist, or maybe it never saw the light of day because certain groups were simply not given a voice within their society. What do you do when you know you cannot call upon women as a source for your 'collective representation'? When the illiterate have left no traces? When an iconoclasm has taken place and religious images have been destroyed? This form of 'non-existence' is, of course, not a real non-existence

because we know for certain that women and illiterate people have always existed. Where are they, then, in the sources? This is what cultural philosophers call the 'paradoxical modality of existence': there is a form of existence that took place outside of our range of view. We know this by virtue of the silence behind words or the absence of a voice. Imagine a mirror: if you stand before it and close your eyes, your image disappears and yet you know that the image still exists. This same conundrum of 'non-existence' shows, as it were, a 'negative' of representation: it is not a form of non-existence but at the same time it is not (or no longer) visible. This is the case with women, with the Aborigines and their ritual acts, with singing medieval monks, or the mathematician Poincaré and his formulation of infinity.

This is especially true when you think about what fiction means precisely: is it important to also consider non-visible elements in trying to understand a culture, or is it better to subject only the visible, hard measurable facts to scientific analysis? If you take the latter as your starting point under the guise of 'real science', then you are in fact saying that Hollywood has nothing to say about current gender relations, that a changing political system in the United States is irrelevant when trying to understand our world, and that the discovery of the Higgs particle does not say anything about the way we see the universe. I would argue that a better understanding of the world we live in is an important objective of the humanities, and a study of the development of the concept of 'culture' makes this objective even more relevant. My hope is that the reader will find that this little truth is highly significant and should actually be self-evident.

The Structure of this Book

The reader may find it useful to know in advance that the various cultural interpretations examined in this book are categorised thematically, although an attempt has been made to maintain chronological order. I only depart from the chronological order of theoretical ideas when explaining specific concepts or interpretations. Each chapter begins with the basic concepts that are required to contextualise certain developments in ideas, establishing links with previous or later chapters. Bear in mind that for each new chapter, the reader should put on a new type of glasses in order to understand why another perspective on culture became necessary at that particular time in history.

In the first chapter I discuss the classics — the first thinkers engaged in studying the concept of culture in a theoretical way. Then in the second

chapter, the concepts of **psychoanalysis** and the history of mentalities are reviewed. The third chapter on language represents a kind of fulcrum, both in the literal sense in the book and in mankind's thinking about culture. Since the *linguistic turn*, language has been seen as the cement that holds together a porous concept such as culture. Chapter 4 discusses the opposite of language: silence. We examine how Marxism made an essential contribution to cultural theory by focusing our attention beyond just the elite, which had largely determined the **canon** of cultural history. Marginal and often oppressed groups, including women, are also a part of culture. Related to the problem in chapter 4 is the theme of chapter 5, which deals with non-Western cultures. After a brief historical explanation about the impact of colonisation, we examine such topics as Said's orientalism and the hybrid state of non-Western cultures that at the same time are under the influence of the West. We will also discuss the Eurocentric view of cultural criticism. The book concludes with a chapter on what culture does to people in practice. What does cultural criticism signify within the **hegemony** of Western visual culture? What do we mean by the practice of remembering, and how does collective memory work?

Before wrapping up this introduction, I would like to clarify two underlying principles supporting the diversity of thought in this book. The tension between Nature and Culture is the central theme in my argument. The view of man as a biomedical creature is so dominant in today's culture that it is almost as if this tension is a new starting point to highlight the *development* of the concept of culture. While man, according to this biomedical view, has to deal with neurology, pathology, age, birth, illness, and death and is part of nature, this very same man gives form to life and death through rites of passage, literature, music, and visual arts. The latter is what we call 'culture'.

The second principle has to do with cultural *interpretation*. Throughout the book we will consider whether there is what you might call a contrarian or an accommodating cultural interpretation. When we interpret a text, an object, or a society in an *accommodating* way, the subject seems to encourage further reflection. A Marxist cultural interpretation of a soap advertisement from the 1920s may invite us, for example, to think more deeply about the fashion and style of the poster or the position of women and the principles of hygiene at the time.

On the other hand, a *contrarian* cultural interpretation of the same poster can force us to reflect on (implicit) norms and values it expresses. When we interpret the poster in a contrarian manner, we analyse elements that the image itself seems to be unaware of. The image of a housewife busy hanging up her spotless laundry to dry appears to be unaware of

the patriarchal social image that is evoked. The black man appearing in a chocolate advertisement from the same period unwittingly contributed to a racist message.

An accommodating cultural analysis focuses on the message the author or creator wanted to convey, while a contrarian cultural analysis focuses on all sorts of things that are not part of the picture. Sometimes we do not even know what the intentions of the author were, and even if we did know, there may still be any number of unintentional connotations surrounding the message. All the themes in this book relate to these two underlying principles: the issue of Culture versus Nature on the one hand, and on the other hand the question of whether a cultural interpretation is accommodating or contrarian.