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CHAPTER 15

CULTURE-BASED APPROACHES

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OVER the past generation, ‘culture’ has been a key analytical category across virtually all disciplines within the humanities and social sciences. The enormous range of ideas and values that has been associated with the term ‘culture’ makes it—along with its yokemate ‘nature’—among the most complex and internally contradictory of all contemporary critical concepts. Various theorists have offered histories and interpretations of ‘culture’ in its multifarious deployments (e.g. Eagleton 2000), which I will not attempt to summarize, let alone replicate, here. Rather, my aim is to examine some of the ways this concept has been deployed in Roman Studies, and in classical scholarship more generally. In so doing, I hope to show what kinds of critical work this concept can be made to do; to make explicit some of the intellectual commitments that accompany the various uses of this term; to illustrate how these commitments are manifested in scholarly works that seem (to me) to represent useful points of reference in our ever-shifting understandings of what ‘Roman culture’ is; and to relate these manifestations in Roman Studies to those found in other disciplines of the humanities and social sciences. Many scholarly works discussed or cited below contain the word ‘culture’ in the title, or otherwise explicitly thematize the concept. Others do not, yet make assumptions about ‘culture’ that are the more revealing for being entirely implicit. When discussing my own work, I do not imagine it is the best or only work of a particular sort: it is merely familiar, hence a ready source of examples of the broader scholarly tendencies I seek to describe.

I begin with a usage of ‘culture’ as a category that encompasses various kinds of aesthetic activity. This usage derives ultimately from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century aesthetic theory. For Matthew Arnold, for example, culture marks a domain of endeavour—art, literature, music, and the like—that aids in the construction of the bourgeois citizen of the (nineteenth-century) nation-state, and is separated from but privileged over the sphere of sordid, practical activities like politics and economics. Hence cultural activities, being both elevated and elevating, are particularly appropriate to those who are, or aspire to become, bourgeois (Lloyd and Thomas 1998: 1–8). This concept of ‘culture’ remains current in everyday speech: ‘cultural institutions’ and ‘cultured people’ are those concerned with music, art, literature, and so on. Moreover, this concept has long been widespread in Roman Studies and Classics generally. The ‘new critical’ approach to literature that was current in Classics in the 1950s and 1960s, and somewhat earlier in other disciplines, presupposed something like this view of culture—treating the literary text as an autonomous object with no connections (of critical interest, at least) to the wider world. While few classical scholars nowadays would accept the idea of a completely autonomous, transcendent aesthetic sphere (due perhaps to the impact of Marxism or other materialist theories of society), nor would most scholars now restrict ‘culture’ to the socially elevated, the term continues to be used by classicists as an umbrella category whose contents are ‘art plus literature plus philosophy (plus perhaps religion) . . .’, which are collectively distinguished, if not held completely apart, from economics and politics.

Consider two instances from recent scholarship in Roman studies. Garnsey and Saller’s survey, *The Roman Empire: Economy, Society, and Culture* (1987), contains chapters on imperialism, government, economy, land and agriculture, trade, status, family, and religion—traditional concerns of economic and social history. The ‘culture’ of the title is picked up only in the final chapter (ch. 10), where the authors examine how ‘values and cultural life in Rome gradually adjusted to the monarchy’ (p. 178); the specific areas in which they observe such adjustment taking place are philosophy, literature, rhetoric, art and architecture, law, and language, both in the city of Rome and in the provinces. Karl Galinsky’s *Augustan Culture: An Interpretive Introduction* (1996) supposes a similar conception of culture. Despite the term’s prominence in his title, Galinsky does not explicitly discuss or define it, nor is it found in his index. In his ‘Introduction’, however, he clearly distinguishes ‘culture’ from politics, and associates it with literature and art (pp. 4–5). Indeed, the book’s heart is a series of chapters on ‘Ideas, Ideals, and Values’, art and architecture, literature, and religion. He asks what is distinctively ‘Augustan’ about such activities and products in this era, and how Augustanism makes its mark upon them. Thus both Galinsky and Garnsey/Saller implicitly embrace the aesthetic conception of culture as being the domain of art, literature, and the like, and as being separate (or separable) from politics and economics, albeit imprinted with political and economic concerns.

The aesthetic conception of culture is probably easy for classical scholars to adopt because it both reflects and reproduces the field's long-standing subdisciplinary structure. The objects that literary critics, art historians, and historians of philosophy study are neatly assigned to the category of 'culture', while historians of the social, economic, and political stripes preside over everything else. Thus a materialist/idealist dichotomy is built into the structure of the field—indeed, this dichotomy may have originated in Arnoldian-style aesthetic theory. It seems fair to say that this is the default conception of culture for many classical scholars, and can be deployed 'untheorized' without special justification or explanation (as Garnsey/Saller and Galinsky do), notwithstanding the edifice of Romantic aesthetic theory that underpins it. This conception, however, is not what the editors of this volume had in mind when they asked me to discuss 'culture-based approaches'. Being congruent with the traditional demarcation of subdisciplines, this conception offers no distinctive 'approach'—no critical purchase that is not already implied or suggested by that pre-existing subdisciplinary structure. Nevertheless, since this conception of culture is widespread among classicists, it is important to have its characteristics clearly in mind as we turn to other conceptions, including (eventually) the one intended by the editors.

An alternative way of conceptualizing culture derives from anthropological ideas about how to characterize the distinctive way of life of any particular group of people, and how to relate different ways of life to one another. An early articulation of this conception comes from E. B. Tylor's *Primitive Culture* (1871: 1): 'Culture or civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.' Leaving aside the equation of 'culture' with 'civilization' (which probably no modern scholar would accept), we find here a definition of culture that differs strikingly from those discussed above. Far from restricting culture to specific products such as literature and art, and to the socially elevated activity of producing and consuming them, culture here embraces virtually every product and practice, implicitly including economics and politics, that could be attributed to *any* member of a society; yet it also casts the net still wider to capture beliefs, knowledge, and other mental states.

This definition, and others like it, have been criticized for being so broad as to exclude nothing except perhaps genetic inheritance, thus making 'culture' coextensive with society itself and depriving the concept of any critical edge (Eagleton 2000: 34). Yet the goal of such a definition is, more or less explicitly, to establish grounds for differentiation and comparison among the ways of life of different groups, which in turn presupposes that each group's way of life has a distinctive, specifiable coherence and systematicity. Accordingly, scholars impose limits in practice that enable the concept of 'culture' to perform these functions of differentiation and specification. Consider how the concept was inflected by anthropologists of the early-to-mid twentieth century who studied non-western,

pre-industrial, non- or proto-commercialized societies of the sort they characterized as 'primitive'. These anthropologists tended to select a particular range of objects for investigation—notably kinship systems, rites and rituals, and regimes of exchange. Though these objects may have been constituted arbitrarily (others might have been constituted instead, or in addition), what matters is that they provided a usable, because sufficiently concrete and limited, basis for analysing any given group's way of life and for comparison among groups. Ancient societies were readily included in such analysis. For instance, Marcel Mauss's *Essai sur le don* (French 1924; English as *The Gift*, 1990) begins with an analysis of exchange in Polynesia, which is then extended to aspects of archaic Roman (and other ancient) law. Likewise Hendrik Wagenvoort, in his *Roman Dynamism* (English 1947, Dutch 1941), deploys the Austronesian category of *mana* as an umbrella category by which to encompass a number of seemingly divergent Roman concepts and practices relating to power, sanctity, and authority. On the basis of the *mana*-comparison, he argues for deep connections and regularities and among the Roman concepts. The overtly comparative method that characterizes these studies has modern counterparts in the current work of the Hellenist Marcel Detienne and the Romanist Maurizio Bettini. The latter's *Anthropology and Roman Culture*, for instance (English 1990, Italian 1987), contains essays on Roman kinship terminology, understandings of temporal relations, and images of the soul; the title itself announces the disciplinary affiliation of the concept of 'culture' deployed therein. Yet, this overtly comparative approach to ancient societies is typically labelled 'anthropological' rather than 'cultural', not least by Detienne and Bettini themselves.

This idea of 'culture' as encompassing a group's particular products, practices, and values potentially allows such groups to be defined almost at will on the basis of shared characteristics, and so distinguished as different 'cultures'. On what bases, and to what ends, such cultures should be defined is a live question in Roman Studies, as elsewhere. For example, the old idea of 'Romanization'—that is, that Roman imperialism resulted in the transference, by force or cooperatively, of Roman culture onto subjected peoples like Gauls, Britons, and Illyrians (but not Greeks!)—is currently being rethought; in question are both the utility of ascribing 'culture' on ethnic or geographic bases (i.e. at what level of analysis the very ideas of 'Roman culture', 'Gallic culture', etc. make sense and are helpful), and the dynamics and mechanisms by which these different groups exchanged their products and practices (e.g. Woolf 1998: 1–23, Barrett 1997). Moreover, one can seek to identify 'subcultures' within a notionally larger, more encompassing culture (e.g. Eagleton 2000: 36–44, Kurke and Dougherty 2003). Thus the non-elites of urban Rome have recently received intensive study, especially regarding how their products and practices relate to those of urban elites (e.g. Clarke 2003; Demaine and Taylor 1999). Among this work, Nicholas Horsfall's *The Culture of the Roman Plebs* (2003) offers a hybrid conception. In ascribing a distinctive form of 'culture' to urban non-elites, he hews to the anthropologically inflected conception of culture just

described. Yet he is primarily interested in how people with little formal schooling and minimal literacy can nevertheless learn history and encounter literature. Thus the particular practices and products he considers are those associated with the aesthetic conception of culture.

What the editors of this volume are interested in is a conceptualization of culture that also has anthropological roots, but is not overtly comparative, and admits of other intellectual influences as well. The conceptualization in question was most compellingly articulated and widely disseminated, at least for North American scholars, through the work of Clifford Geertz. In his classic collection of essays *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973), Geertz outlined an 'interpretive' anthropology that was fundamentally semiotic. Culture, he asserted, is 'an interworked system of construable signs' that forms the context in which social processes, practices, and concepts take on meaning and may be described (pp. 14, 24). For him, culture is ontologically much the same as what Tylor took it to be—a system of concepts, products, and practices. Yet Geertz gives it an epistemology as well: it has an observable symbolic character that makes it available to all, and potentially knowable to anyone who can interpret or construe that sign-system. Culture is less *what* a group thinks, feels, and makes, than the symbolic *medium* by, through, or with which it does these things (Ortner 1997: 6–7; Sewell 1997: 39). The paradigmatic symbolic system, for Geertz, is writing, and it is by analogy with literary-critical techniques that he imagines the interpretation of other cultural 'scripts' to proceed. While Geertz's formulations have probably been most influential among Anglophone scholars, continental theorists have expressed a similar conceptualization of culture employing the Foucauldian category of 'discourse' in place of Geertz's 'symbols'. Under this formulation, 'discursive formations' are the domain of cultural analysis; culture is then broadly understood as those social products and practices (or particular dimensions thereof) that are constructed discursively (e.g. Chartier 1994).

Just what are the concepts, products, and practices that count as 'cultural' on this understanding? Literature and texts in general, being the symbolic/discursive activity and product par excellence, still fall within the ambit of 'culture'. But so also does much of the 'political' sphere, since (for instance) governmental regimes and their opponents engage in symbolic activity that is supposed to be meaningful and interpretable to citizens/subjects, external enemies, and other interested observers. Likewise for many other dimensions of public or civic life: all kinds of performance and ritual practice, exchange, games, and so on involve symbolic activity that takes its meaning in relation to overarching symbolic structures. Thus culture resides in the symbolic or discursive *dimension* of social practices and products—the place where specific, socially situated deployments of signs intersect with the symbolic structures that give these deployments meaning. Some practitioners have held that symbolic structures actually determine human thought and practice, reducing the latter to mere 'expressions' of the former and thereby

sweeping away agency. Other theorists argue, more plausibly, that structures organize and regulate practice but without determining it, hence that persons actively *make* meaning as they manipulate the symbolic resources that the structure puts at their disposal in any given social situation. On this view symbolic structures provide, as it were, the rules of a game and the equipment with which to play it, while practice involves the players' strategic, tactical, situationally conditioned interpretations of those rules and deployments of that equipment, as they play in quest of social advantage (Chartier 1988: 14; Ortner 1997: 10; Sewell 1999: 44–7; Kurke and Dougherty 1993: 3–5; Spiegel 2005: 11–18).

The cultural (in the sense of symbolic/discursive) dimensions of specific social practices may not, however, exhaust the interest and significance of these practices. The Roman practice of enslaving defeated enemies en masse, for instance, created new forms of symbolic capital, along with new modes of aristocratic display, in the last two centuries BCE. It also changed rural settlement and cultivation patterns, as well as the social status and identity of the people working the land. On the understanding of culture under discussion here, only the former, symbolic aspects of the practice admit of 'cultural' analysis, while the latter, non-symbolic aspects do not, notwithstanding their great interest to social historians. However, the questions of where exactly the boundaries of symbolic construability lie in specific cases or in general, how non-discursive or non-symbolic practices or processes can be recognized, and even whether all systems of signification should *ipso facto* be deemed 'cultural' systems, are much debated (e.g. Chartier 1994; Stedman Jones 1996: 26–8; Morris 2000: 14–17; Spiegel 1997: 28; Sewell 1999: 48–9; Eagleton 2000: 33–4). There remains, moreover, a wide range of opinion about whether, and to what extent, 'cultural' activity is dependent on more 'basic', material social processes (as orthodox Marxism would have it), or instead is autonomous enough to affect other processes and drive social change itself.

This semiotic conception of culture has had important theoretical and methodological consequences for students of past societies. Consider first the relationship between texts and the social situations in which they were produced. Insofar as texts and other social practices and products are regarded as discursively constructed and therefore amenable to similar interpretive techniques, any notional boundary between text and context, between literary product and the historical circumstances of its production, is dissolved into a single continuum of interpretable signs. Confronted with this, the famous 'linguistic turn', some literary critics—whose *métier* is the analysis of discourse—have been enticed to undertake semiotic analyses of cultural systems other than literary texts, which might formerly have been deemed 'context' and reserved for historians. Conversely, some historians have been spurred to develop their skills as interpreters of signs and discourses, the traditional domain of literary critics. Out of this mixing, the interdisciplinary categories of 'new historicism', 'cultural poetics', and '(new) cultural history' (a long-standing subcategory of social history, now reconfigured in light of the

semiotic conception of culture) emerged in the 1980s—different flavours, essentially, of the semiotic analysis of ‘culture’ understood as an undifferentiated amalgam of text-and-context (Spiegel 1997: 12–18; Chartier 1988: 13–14). This convergence of literary and historical concerns and methods has had the salutary effect of reminding both literary critics and historians how complex the other’s interpretive activity is; for instance, neither can provide full, true, clear knowledge to serve as a ‘stable term’ against which the other’s complexities and enigmas can be tested (Kraemer 1989: 115–16, 126–8; Spiegel 1997: 19–23; Morris 2000: 27–8). In Roman Studies, early hints of this *rapprochement* between literary and historical studies may perhaps be seen in the 1980s vogue for projects entitled *Literature and Politics...*, or the like (e.g. Woodman and West 1984; Sullivan 1985; Powell 1992). While none of these studies are overtly semiotic, they do work on the assumption that literary discourses encode or project political discourses, and that the task of understanding how, why, and to what effect this encoding occurs requires the expertise of historians and literary scholars alike. To my knowledge, classicists began to articulate such questions in terms of the cultural theory under discussion only in the 1990s. Kurke and Dougherty (1993: 1–6) explain why the idea of culture as a ‘text’ constituted from writing, art, ritual practices, and so on—and whose interpretation therefore requires the expertise of historians, literary critics, art historians, and archaeologists together—offers an especially fruitful approach to the study of archaic Greece. And in Roman Studies, Thomas Habinek’s *Politics of Latin Literature* (1998: 1–9) explicitly positions itself with respect to contemporary critical debates about the textuality of culture, the relation of text to context, and the social function of literature as an arena for competition among elites and the discourses they produce.

Such interdisciplinarity is a welcome consequence of the semiotic theory of culture. Yet the collapsing of text and context entails further complications. A familiar conundrum for classicists is that, when we seek to place an ancient text into some kind of context, we must often construct this context from assertions, hints, and silences within that very text. Thus we have long realized the necessity of considering to what extent the worlds our texts project as existing outside themselves may be objectively ‘real’, and to what extent such worlds are subject to fabrication, distortion, the imposition of characteristics convenient for the literary genre, and so on. To this extent, we have always understood that contexts themselves are (in the terms of cultural theory) discursive constructs. In its strongest poststructuralist form, however, the semiotic theory of culture finds here not a problem of insufficient evidence, but a fundamental epistemological limit. Drawing on Saussurean linguistics, according to which the signs that constitute the system of language (*langue*) take their meanings not through reference to an objective, external reality, but only through their differential relations to other signs, poststructuralism asserts that there is no unmediated access to an independently existing, objectively external ‘context’. Rather, it holds that texts can give

access only to ‘circumambient discourses’ projected from within themselves, discourses that are but further varieties of the same essential textuality as the text itself (e.g. Spiegel 1997: 14–15, 19). On this view we are in an inescapable abyss of textuality, with no access to pre- or extra-discursive reality—a view famously crystallized in Derrida’s lapidary pronouncement: ‘il n’y a pas de hors-texte.’ Classicists (and others) are thereby relieved of the task of teasing apart the ‘real’ from the (purely) ‘constructed’ in our texts, though social historians have been nonplussed to have their entire field of enquiry bracketed off as inaccessible.

For several reasons, the strongest form of this claim—always controversial—does not now seem to command significant assent. Increasingly careful consideration of how texts and other discursive formations relate to the material practices that condition their production has led some scholars to conclude that the post-structuralist denial of *all* referentiality and instrumentality to language is indefensible (see Spiegel 1997: 24–8, 48–56; Morris 2000: 16). Moreover, non-discursive or non-symbolic aspects of social practice (discussed above), even if knowable only through discourse—that is, by talking or writing about them—nevertheless may operate according to different rules from discourse, and so cannot be fully encompassed by discourse; these necessarily form some kind of ‘outside’ with relation to textuality (Chartier 1994). Finally, methods that reject the Saussurean premise of non-referentiality have become more widely known and accepted among humanists. Cognitive scientists, for example, have argued that all human language is subtended by conceptual categories and schemata that are rooted in the human body and its modes of interacting with its environment, and indeed are hard-wired into the human brain. On this view, language does derive its meaning referentially, though that reference is ultimately to internal cognitive schemata rather than to things in an external world (e.g. Lakoff 1987: 269–303 and *passim*).

While Romanists have assuredly become more aware of the presence and character of discursive formations in ancient representational forms and of the difficulties of inferring ‘real life’ from them, I know of no significant Roman scholarship that has followed the poststructuralist move of denying referentiality on principle. On the contrary, some areas of Roman Studies are noteworthy for their efforts to strike a balance—to acknowledge that discursive construction is pervasive and poses an epistemological challenge, yet without abandoning ‘reality’. Scholars who study Roman women, for example, have demonstrated that the moralizing, normative discourses about women that are commonly found in our (male-authored) texts cannot be taken to present historical realities (e.g. Maria Wyke’s 1980s work on the elegiac ‘mistress’, now collected and updated in Wyke 2002). Yet in their desire to recover the ‘hard surfaces’ of ancient women’s lives, these scholars have been reluctant to accept that *all* we can know securely about ancient women are the various discourses of which they are constructions. Let me present an instance from my own work on Roman dining. Certain texts assert that the ancestral, ‘modest’ practice of Roman women was to dine seated and abstain

from wine. Other texts, meanwhile, represent women reclining and drinking wine, thus sharing with men the characteristic practices of leisured elite dining. Assuredly these are contradictory discourses about women's commensality projected by, and circumambient to, our texts. But must we stop there? If we attend to the rhetoric of these two modes of representation, we find that the first mode appears in very few texts, yet is always thematized and rhetorically elaborated. It makes an ideologically potent, normative claim about proper female comportment, whose retrojection into the past frames it as a compelling model for behaviour in the present. These texts project specific social anxieties about gender, sexuality, and intoxication. The second representation, conversely, tends to appear unthematized in many texts widely diffused over time and genre, texts that have entirely other focuses and themes. To me, the conclusion seems inescapable that the latter representations are textual reflexes of an actual contemporary social practice, apprehended as such by various authors in a range of contexts. These authors deploy such representations to construct a veristic background against which to pose their thematized representations, which often have nothing to do with gender or dining practices. The former representations, in fact, make little sense as behavioural norms unless actual social practice were exactly the opposite, that is, as the second discourse represents it (Roller 2006: 116–18, 153–6; see also Morris 2000: 16; Spiegel 1997: 24–8). Close attention to the rhetoric of such representations, then, may enable us to discern respects in which literary language functions referentially—indeed, to see that referentiality can itself participate in the construction of the discourses that constitute and mediate our perceptions of the world. Thus it seems possible to retain a semiotic view of culture as the symbolic/discursive medium through which human practices and products become meaningful, and to exploit the considerable power of semiotic analysis for interpreting ancient societies, without plunging into the poststructuralist abyss of non-referential textuality.

There is a second key way—beside its manner of articulating text with context—in which the semiotic conception of culture has impacted the study of past societies: namely, by promoting the formulation of 'synchronic' objects of analysis. This propensity follows from the conception of culture as (in part) a *system* of signs, or as a discursive *formation*. The structural aspect is thus presented as static, with all constituent signs existing simultaneously. This is not quite a 'snapshot' of a particular moment: it is the analytic suspension of time within a particular epoch so that signs actually deployed sequentially appear to coexist. The resulting analysis tends to elucidate the relationships among signs within a given system, hence explain what various moves and counter-moves within that system might mean and do, rather than illuminating the diachronic process of how and why the structure came into being and undergoes transformation (on these matters see Sewell 1997: 39–42; Spiegel 1997: 20–1). To be sure, synchronic analysis—identifying patterns, regularities, and consistencies that supposedly characterize the whole of a given time period—has always been an indispensable tool in the historian's kit, and

there is nothing inherently semiotic about it. Indeed, synchrony is characteristic of much sociological theory, which generally seeks to explain particular states of society rather than social transformation. In Roman studies, certain time-spans have traditionally been constituted as synchronic epochs, for example, the ‘age of Augustus’ (Galinsky 1996; Zanker 1990) and the ‘age of Nero’ (Sullivan 1985). In these cases, the justification for constituting such a synchronic epoch appears to be that one person’s mind, policies, and ideas subtend the period’s cultural production in a consistent, regular manner. In fact this assumption is dubious, and a semiotic cultural analysis could as easily stress incoherence and disunity as coherence and systematicity. The larger point, however, is that any time-span might potentially be constituted as a synchronic epoch, depending on what one wishes to analyse. And semiotic cultural analyses are particularly prone to being framed synchronically.

A few examples of recent work in Roman Studies illustrate the capabilities of synchronic cultural analysis, as well as its limitations. Consider first Harriet Flower’s *Ancestor Masks and Aristocratic Power in Roman Culture* (1995). As in certain studies mentioned earlier, Flower does not explicitly discuss or define the term ‘culture’, despite deploying it prominently in the title. Her argument, however, is unmistakably a synchronically framed semiotic analysis of a particular social product (the *imago* or ancestor mask) and the practices that involve it. Several chapters describe a discrete discourse or symbolic system within which the *imago* has meaning: the funeral, the *laudatio*, the atrium of the aristocratic house, the electoral assembly. The representations assembled for analysis are textual (literary or inscriptional), visual, architectural, and topographical, and for the most part date from or refer to the middle to late Republic. This, implicitly, is the synchronic epoch within which the systems of symbols and practices examined in these chapters are presented as coexisting. What justifies constituting this synchronic epoch, presumably, is the persistence of an oligarchic political system and a range of strategies by which aristocrats competed for prominence and power within this system. Flower pays a modicum of attention to change over time, with two chapters on imperial manifestations of the *imagines* and an appendix on putative Etruscan origins. But the book’s heart is in the analysis of *imagines* deployed as symbols that create meaning in key arenas of competitive elite display, during an epoch in which a particular political system made such display both possible and advantageous.

A different epoch, with different justification, appears in Robert Kaster’s *Emotion, Restraint, and Community in Ancient Rome* (2005). Here the author examines a group of Roman emotions that involve specific sequences of perception, evaluation, and response by persons experiencing them. Kaster calls these sequences ‘scripts’, a term in this case derived from cognitive studies of emotion. From cognitive science, too, comes his conception of how emotions instantiate and map onto psychological states. He also argues, however, that the emotions in

question relate to one another and to social values in predictable ways; he thus considers how a set of practices—the ‘scripts’ that enact the emotions—relate to a structure of values that give them meaning. In this respect, the analysis of how signs in practice relate to signs as structure, his study is ‘cultural’ in our sense. The structure, moreover, is extremely durable: Kaster contends that the scripts he analyses barely change between about 100 BCE and 100 CE.

My own article entitled ‘Exemplarity in Roman Culture’ (2004) discusses what I call the discourse of exemplarity. I contend that a certain structure of values and practices, involving action, evaluation, commemoration, and imitation, remains essentially unchanged from the second century BCE (the age of Polybius) into the high empire. After describing this structure (pp. 4–7), I examine in detail how two specific exemplary figures are invoked and deployed in texts from this period, considering how each invocation both derives meaning from the structure and inflects elements of that structure to the advantage of the person deploying the exemplum.

Finally, consider Paul Zanker’s celebrated study *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus* (1990). Zanker’s use of the term ‘culture’ in this study is purely aesthetic, referring always to art and literature. Yet the project itself, as the title suggests (equally in the original 1987 German edition: *Augustus und die Macht der Bilder*), insists on understanding visual representation in the context of ‘power’—as a medium, indeed, through which the regime exercised its power. Thus the notionally unifying aims of Augustus himself—or rather, according to Zanker, the two quite different faces Augustus showed before and after Actium—provide the structures within which artworks of this era take on their individual and collective meaning. This book’s warm reception and wide readership among literary critics and historians is largely attributable, I think, to its approach, which may have seemed familiar and comprehensible to scholars who themselves embraced a similar conception of culture. In short, Zanker’s book made other scholars aware that the analysis of art could employ methods, and address problems, shared across subdisciplines.

Yet most students of past societies would probably agree that synchronic modes of analysis, no matter how powerful, cannot by themselves provide a fully satisfactory account of the past: equally essential are diachronic analyses that address how and why change occurs. Explaining change over time within a semiotic conception of culture involves explaining how one synchronically constituted system of signs turns into another that is significantly different. Such a project, one might reckon, entails more than twice the work of simply analysing a given cultural system synchronically. For one must undertake two such analyses of different synchronic stages, and then additionally account for how and why signs and their relations are transformed from the first stage to the second.

How might such transformation be understood, and what might an analysis of it look like? In any given situation, an individual actor combines and deploys

available signs in a unique, individually and contextually determined way (Sahlins 2000). Thus the pre-constituted structural relations among signs are always being jostled, as it were, by the countless everyday cultural transactions of innumerable individual agents. The overall structural impact of such ‘everyday’ jostling is probably small. Significant structural shifts would seem to require special conditions: for instance, if many actors, through their everyday transactions, consistently press the pre-constituted relationships among signs in the same direction. Such pressure might be spurred by the appearance of unfamiliar or unprecedented situations that cannot be assimilated within the current symbolic structure. Marshall Sahlins’s study *Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities* (1981) is frequently praised for showing how such change was spurred in Hawaii by contact with European culture. Sahlins combines synchronic analyses of particular symbolic orders with diachronic accounts of how each order was transformed into the next, as the local culture assimilated European products and practices (see also Biersack 1989: 84–96; Kurke and Dougherty 1993: 3–4; Sewell 1997: 46–8, 1999: 51; Stedman Jones 1996: 30). I know few attempts at such diachronic symbolic analysis in Roman Studies. However, two studies seem worth mentioning. Consider first Habinek and Schiesaro’s 1997 collection *The Roman Cultural Revolution*. Despite the titular nod to Ronald Syme’s classic study *The Roman Revolution* (1939), the editors contend, *contra* Syme, that cultural change is central to whatever ‘revolutionary’ character the Augustan age and preceding decades may be thought to have. While the contributors embrace diverse conceptions of culture, one contribution—Andrew Wallace-Hadrill’s ‘*Mutatio morum*: The Idea of a Cultural Revolution’—employs the semiotic conception in order to identify practices and structures that changed over this period. Wallace-Hadrill contends that the authoritative discourses of tradition, time, law, and language, which had long been embedded in a network of traditional aristocratic discourses and practices, were isolated and transformed under Augustus into specialist discourses. These were ordered according to ‘scientific’ principles derived from Hellenism, and controlled by specialized practitioners (antiquarians, astronomers, jurists, grammarians) who were new to the aristocracy and patronized by the Augustan regime. For Wallace-Hadrill, then, the signs and relations among signs that characterize these discursive formations in the late Republic (implicitly the first of two synchronic epochs) are reordered according to principles extrinsic to this system, and thus are transformed into their ‘Augustan’ configurations (the later of the two synchronic epochs). The second pertinent study is my own *Constructing Autocracy: Aristocrats and Emperors in Julio-Claudian Rome* (2001). In chapter 4 (pp. 213–87) I contend that a particular pair of metaphors played a central role in the evolution of the emperor’s authority during the Julio-Claudian period: namely, the understanding of his relationship to other aristocrats as that of master to slave, or as father to son. Other models were also in play: the patron in relation to his clients, and the Republican magistrate in relation to fellow citizens. But when contemporary aristocrats applied these

domestic models of authority—‘father’ and ‘master’ being contrasting faces of the *paterfamilias*—to their relationship with the *princeps*, they were not simply seeking to comprehend changes that had already occurred, but were also proactively imposing normative expectations about what the relationship of emperor to aristocrat *ought* to be like, and of how these parties should regard and treat one another. Julio-Claudian aristocrats thus seized the initiative in shaping the evolution of the Principate by transferring cultural symbols from one social domain to another, thereby establishing new meanings—new structural relations among symbols—that were advantageous to themselves.

I conclude with a prospect, and some desiderata. First, if the semiotic conception of culture is to achieve its full potential as a tool for analysing the ancient Roman world, diachronic modes of analysis must be further developed and more widely practised, to supplement the impressive results already gained from synchronic modes of analysis. Second, and more fundamentally, the interdisciplinarity that the semiotic conception of culture makes both possible and necessary must be pursued more aggressively. Much of the theoretical discussion surrounding ‘cultural approaches’ has focused on the relationship thereby forged between literary criticism and history. Yet art is also implicated in this rapprochement of subdisciplines. No critical technique is more semiotic by nature than iconography, and the most impressive examples of this approach to date in Classics—the work of Flower and Zanker, for example—have integrated iconography with textual and historical analysis. I myself attempt something similar in *Dining Posture in Ancient Rome* (2006), which combines literary, historical, and iconographic methods to interpret the meanings associated with different bodily dispositions in the Roman *convivium*. To be sure, the template for interdisciplinary work that the semiotic approach to culture provides—that many disciplines allow for the analysis of signifying structures and practices, and that knowledge so generated, being all on the same (semiotic) epistemological footing, becomes intelligible and commensurate across disciplines—is but one of many possible templates for interdisciplinary work. All forms of interdisciplinarity, though, require that the materials and techniques of more than one discipline be present simultaneously in a single scholar’s mind.

Appropriate multidisciplinary training can best be supplied by graduate programmes. Graduate students trained in iconographical, historical, and literary methods alike will turn into scholars capable of articulating broad, new, fundamental questions at the points where these forms of representation intersect and cross-illuminate (Morris 2000: 27–8). Indeed, the Classics Ph.D programme at Johns Hopkins University aims to achieve exactly this, with all students required to take a range of seminars and a battery of examinations in Greek and Roman history, Greek and Latin language and literature, and classical art and archaeology. Naturally, compromises among the demands of the subdisciplines are necessary lest the programme expand to unreasonable length. For instance, rather

than attending eight or ten graduate seminars in a single, ‘major’ subdiscipline (as I did in graduate school), our students attend three or four seminars in each subdiscipline; thus they gain representative, though not comprehensive, training in each subdiscipline prior to beginning dissertation work. Language training is in no way compromised, however, since cultural semiotics requires the fullest possible access to the sign systems of the cultures being studied: hence our students must develop fully professional Greek and Latin skills, no less than students in traditional philological programmes. By such means we hope to overcome Balkanization by subdiscipline, which remains the biggest barrier to the sort of interdisciplinarity that the semiotic approach to culture requires of its practitioners (Greenblatt 1995: 230).

FURTHER READING

Gabrielle Spiegel provides lucid, brief narratives of the emergence and development of the semiotic approach to culture (from an historian’s perspective) in ch. 1 of *The Past as Text* (1997), and in her ‘Introduction’ to the edited collection *Practicing History* (2005). Clifford Geertz’s 1973 collection *The Interpretation of Cultures* is foundational for this approach, especially ch. 1, ‘Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture’, and ch. 15, ‘Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight’. A special issue of *Representations* (59, 1997), edited by Sherry Ortner, provides a valuable retrospective and assessment of Geertz’s impact. Stimulating discussions of the state of play at particular moments in the development of this approach are found in L. Hunt (ed.), *The New Cultural History* (1989), and V. Bonnell and L. Hunt (eds.), *Beyond the Cultural Turn* (1999).

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