

Culture-as-text in the work of Clifford Geertz

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The notion that the world is a text, often obscure in its meaning and thus in need of interpretation, has been entertained periodically since falling out of favor in the early modern period. With Baudelaire and Mallarmé, for instance, Symbolist poetic theory presupposed an articulate cosmos, a “forest of symbols” whose sometimes confused messages might be understood and enunciated in an Orphic language corresponding with that of Nature itself. Indeed, the possibility that language takes on unusual forms so as to inhabit the world at large (and in a fuller sense than our metaphoric references to the “language” of the bees or the genetic “code” would suggest) has been evoked consistently on the periphery of contemporary discourse. The essentially semantic character of the universe was a tenet of Lévi-Strauss’s structuralism, for example, while the universality of textuality has been argued by those like Jacques Derrida who reject structuralism yet retain its emphasis on language as the fundamental modality of existence.

As an issue in metaphysics, the extent or purview of textuality is one of those imponderables dependent upon taste or religious conviction. We are at liberty, it would seem, to underscore our sense of the sacral quality of language by conceiving of the world entirely as verbiage. But as an issue in the cultural sciences the question of the boundaries of language has important methodological consequences. For some semioticians and semiotic anthropologists, culture is everywhere textual, everywhere telling a story that needs to be deciphered and interpreted. With culture at least, if not with the world generally, there perhaps *is* nothing outside of texts, from which it would follow that anthropology, sociology, history, and the like should be disposed to interpretive *reading* as the primary tool of understanding. On the other hand, anthropologists such as Dan Sperber have argued that the domain of language should be restricted to publicly coded sign systems (which are only a portion of what we think of as culture.)¹

Some phenomena we might take to be meaningful in a linguistic sense are really quite innocent of message and therefore of textuality. Such phenomena, of which the plastic arts and music are common examples, are not appropriately *read* (if we want to employ the term rigorously) in the first place, because it would be as awkward to decipher their supposed messages as those of the trees and the brooks.

Foremost among the proponents of culture-as-text has been Clifford Geertz. If for Mallarmé the entire world existed for the purpose of winding up in a book, with Geertz culture, at least, has always lain between covers, waiting to be read:

The concept of culture I espouse . . . is essentially a semiotic one. Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning. It is explication I am after, construing social expressions on their surface enigmatical.²

On this view the sphere of social expression, of text, is largely coextensive with culture, because all our artifacts and actions, whether linguistic or not, are capable of being involved in those webs of significance whose enigmatic surface it becomes the goal of the anthropologist to decipher and explicate. The Balinese cockfight, for example, is potentially as much a text as is one of Mallarmé's poems. And because both fail of perspicuousness, understanding them requires an interpretive act, a construal that renders them more accessible to us. The reading reduces the enigma, appropriating the foreign by relating it to familiar categories of our own experience and motivating its occurrence.

As a programmatic generality this sounds unexceptionable, yet in Geertz's hands it consistently has consequences that should lead us to question the value of treating non-linguistic culture textually. Some of his most celebrated readings, though aimed at reducing the strangeness of foreign social practices, are themselves quite peculiar, first in that they view their subject matter in terms of a category of our own experience – the sublime³ – that is itself exotic, and then because in doing so they overstep, often dramatically, the evidence presented in their favor. The “texts” Geertz sets out to explicate are characteristically compared to our own most numinous documents, by which we are both enthralled and confused, so that in the end the degree of clarification achieved remains in question, as does the evidential warrant for the result. Thus the difficulty we face in assessing Geertz is whether through his readings we are being

given access to numinous webs of significance that have a demonstrable existence in the cultural settings he explores, or whether in textualizing culture he has created opportunities for a sublimity that is largely the product of his own proclivities and literary imagination. The cases I will discuss suggest the latter option must sometimes be entertained, and though this is not an entirely novel conclusion,⁴ I want to use it to raise larger issues about the impact of textual metaphors on anthropological analysis and the interpretive strategies employed therein.

The essays collected in *The Interpretation of Cultures* are introduced by one on “thick description,” a notion Geertz borrows from Gilbert Ryle to distinguish between the behavioral surface of action, which could be “thinly” described in terms of mere physical gestures, and the public signification of those gestures – something that depends both on established codes of meaning and on the actors’ intentions to bring these into play. Though a twitch of the eye might resemble a wink physically, for example, the twitch is not a wink, nor is a burlesqued or ironic wink the same as one meant straightforwardly. Understanding action involves knowing the conventions according to which it signifies and determining whether these are being activated. As Geertz says:

Once human behavior is seen as ... symbolic action – action which, like phonation in speech, pigment in painting, line in writing, or sonance in music, signifies ... the thing to ask is what [its] import is: what it is, ridicule or challenge, irony or anger, snobbery or pride, that ... is getting said.⁵

Here it seems to be the *message* – whatever gets *said* by action – that Geertz’s semiotic anthropology seeks to describe as thickly as possible. In the statement quoted earlier, on the other hand, Geertz suggested his aim was to explicate culture as Weberian “webs of significance.” These latter are, however, rather different things: signification, by means of which things get said, of necessity employs public codes to convey information, whereas “webs of significance” are essentially ethno-interpretations, generally worked up in afterthought as people construct what Frank Kermode has called “fictions of relation” whereby puzzling events are woven into a broader fabric that makes sense of them.⁶ The famous Lisbon earthquake took on significance for some in a theological framework (as a punishment for the decadence of the Portuguese), though today it is thought “meaningless” apart from its symptomatic role in plate tectonics: however, it cannot be said to have *signified* anything in terms of a code generally accepted at the moment of its occurrence. Though it is often useful as a rhetorical strategy in interpretation to assume that what one construes to be the significance of some phenomenon was what it in

fact signified – what its message to us was – such a claim could be legitimate only where the interpreted phenomenon was already linguistic. Thus though the analysis and explication of webs of significance (ethno-interpretations) are obviously central to anthropology, there is no reason to call upon textual metaphors in dealing with them: the ethno-interpretations themselves are necessarily “language,” but the same cannot be said of the phenomena they interpret.

More specifically, the anthropological notion of a cultural text implies that a *native* code is being employed, consciously or not, to send and receive messages. We are always free to view non-linguistic behavior as “expressive” and invent some interpretive instrument, perhaps numerological or Freudian, to decipher it, but in this case it becomes a text for us without having been one for the natives. Where expressive behavior can be shown to be symptomatic (that is, where it is produced by some observable cause or underlying condition), scientific inquiry can decipher what it “means” in just the same sense that we take medical symptoms to be meaningful. But expressive behavior that does not take advantage of a public code cannot otherwise have any communicative “import” or get anything said. We should note here that though Geertz refers to the message or import of “pigment in painting, line in writing, or sonance in music,” only where these media have been conventionalized in terms of a sign system could definable messages be articulated through them: uncoded expressive behavior would be as mute in any culture as we presume nature to be in ours. The significance of such behavior might be pondered, just as we ponder the significance of our own works of art, but nothing could be signified through it (unless symptomatically). At any rate, in principle if not always in practice, Geertz emphasizes that cultural texts must employ native codes: certainly if the “ridicule or challenge, irony or anger” referred to above are not getting said by and to natives, they are not getting said at all.⁷

Finally, if cultural texts must necessarily use native codes to convey messages, this might be done either consciously or unconsciously. In fact (as is presumably the case with our own “body language” on occasion) it is possible that natives might be quite unaware both of the messages they send and the codes they employ. Perhaps, for instance, cockfights “say” something to the Balinese by means of resonances beneath their level of awareness, so that they are unable to articulate either the message or the code it employs. To crack such a code would be a signal achievement, and we can assume that just such an ambition spurred Lévi-Strauss to inquire further and further into the supposed structural language of myth, where-

by unconscious messages were thought to be encoded beneath the semantic surface of texts. Yet the burden of evidence necessary to demonstrate the workings of such unconscious codes or languages is onerous, at least whenever we assume something weighs in the balance. If we can draw again on the example of symptomatic “meaning” as read through medicine, we find that there the most elaborate methodological precautions must be taken to establish a diagnostic reading, the eventual verification of which becomes a community project. Though the social sciences cannot be expected to meet such rigorous standards, the basic principles by which we would gain confidence in the decoding of unconscious communications are the same as those used to discern symptomatic meanings in medicine: we need to show how some information has been encoded, identifying the specific means by which it is conveyed, and then show that its reception has some discernable effect on an audience. In the absence of such demonstration, attaching meaning to gestures or practices simply becomes a matter of interpretive fiat. On the other hand, where communication is conscious we face few of these methodological difficulties: in such a case we need merely ask natives to explain the code they use.

Though tedious to make in the abstract, distinctions between significance and signification, symptomatic expression and communication, and conscious or unconscious use of codes are all crucial if we are to understand how one might view culture as a text and provide evidence to substantiate any interpretation of particulars. Unfortunately these distinctions are for the most part ignored by Geertz, whose notion of a text remains intuitive and thus must be puzzled out from the individual analyses. In the most satisfying of these he introduces us to exotic native codes, familiarity with which allows us to understand foreign happenings for the gestural dialogues they are, and on these occasions viewing culture textually seems not only apposite but mandatory. His least satisfying ones, however, employ a complex and dubious strategy: he first speculates about the *significance* of some not evidently linguistic native practice (arriving at conclusions unauthorized by ethno-interpretation), and then goes on to conflate this significance with what the practice, now assumed to be a text (and “read” as such by the natives), signifies or expresses. Whether the message is consciously or unconsciously conveyed is left ambiguous, and little or no evidence, either from native “readings” or analysis of context, is provided to support the interpretation. Furthermore, in the first moment of this strategy the attraction of the sublime asserts itself, so that numinous and ineffable “messages” are conjured up, which it now becomes the supposed purpose of the practice to communicate.

I want to illustrate this by several examples, looking first at Geertz's celebrated essay on the cockfight.⁸ This piece is deservedly considered brilliant and has achieved a position perhaps exemplary among recent interpretive documents in the social sciences. It gives us more than just a paraphrase of the cockfight-as-text and thus a rendering of its message: we get as well some hypotheses about Balinese motives in producing it. But one of these hypotheses – the one that actually transforms the phenomenon not just into a text but into a sublime document – is both entirely unsubstantiated and quite implausible, calling into question the strategy employed. Before addressing this directly, however, I want to review the broader argument so as to provide the setting in which it occurs.

In the first place, that cockfights are central to Balinese life seems beyond question: they are proscribed by law, and yet the Balinese risk somewhat capricious prosecution to put them on; they introduce most major religious festivals, occurring legally only before the more important of these; and preparations for them take up an inordinate amount of male labor, an amount termed “crazy” by aficionados themselves. Further, elements of cockfighting are so antithetical to the customary patterns of Balinese culture that this centrality is perplexing: the Balinese are civil, polite, well-mannered in the extreme, formal, order-loving, not easily given to violence – and yet the cockfight is chaotic and violent; the Balinese abhor animals and animality in general – yet treat their cocks with such meticulous care (at least until they lose a fight) as almost to privilege them over humans. In short, something hardly rational, in Max Weber's sense, seems to be going on here. Though the fights afford much simple pleasure of gambling and because of this act as a draw for the circulating markets of the countryside, we remain puzzled by this choice of an activity that smacks of cultural schizophrenia. Cockfights are on their surface certainly enigmatical, in need of an interpretation that would make them, and the Balinese, less so.

To provide this interpretation Geertz first calls on a category of behavior, “deep play,” and suggests why the Balinese cockfight should belong to it. The concept of deep play is taken from Jeremy Bentham:

By it he means play in which the stakes are so high that it is, from his utilitarian standpoint, irrational for men to engage in it at all. If a man whose fortune is a thousand pounds ... wagers five hundred of it on an even bet, the marginal utility of the pound he stands to win is clearly less than the marginal disutility of the one he stands to lose. In genuine deep play, this is the case for both parties. They are both in over their heads. Having come together in search of pleasure they have entered into a relationship which will bring the participants, considered collectively, net pain rather than net pleasure. Bentham's conclusion was, therefo-

re, that deep play was immoral from first principles and, a typical step for him, should be prevented legally.⁹

The depth of play varies in cockfights, but the ones attracting the most attention and betting on the side are precisely the deepest, where the cocks are evenly matched and the “central” bets placed by owners and their kin are high in relation to net worth. It was the primitiveness and irrationality of such an event that brought on its proscription by the government.

Now though Geertz uses the notion of deep play to inaugurate his reading and pull Bentham’s nose a bit, a later, somewhat parenthetical comment suggests it is not quite apposite in the present case.¹⁰ In a sense, cockfight betting is only momentarily deep because though wagers are indeed high in relation to net worth, they are also so frequent and the cocks so evenly matched that one can expect to recoup one’s losses quickly from those of others who engage in the betting. The system thus resembles what Lévi-Strauss has called “generalized exchange,” where one gives readily in the expectation of getting back. Over a longer span of time, then, cockfight gambling does not meet Bentham’s criterion of net pain – at least apart from the occasional tragic case. Before admitting this, however, Geertz uses the notion to establish a preliminary sphere of significance for the fights:

It is in large part *because* the marginal disutility of loss is so great at the higher levels of betting that to engage in such betting is to lay one’s public self, allusively and metaphorically, through the medium of one’s cock, on the line. And though to a Benthamite this might seem merely to increase the irrationality of the enterprise that much further, to the Balinese what it mainly increases is the meaningfulness of it all. And as (to follow Weber rather than Bentham) the imposition of meaning on life is the major end and primary condition of human existence, that access of significance more than compensates for the economic costs involved.¹¹

Further, the fights are watched in a state of kinesthetic rapture by participants and bettors, whose intoxication ebbs and flows with the significance of the struggles as social dramas.

In these the cocks stand for human actors. Balinese society, Geertz argues, is ascriptive, hierarchical, clan-and-caste structured, and freighted with implicit and explicit social tensions between groups. Prestige is partly fixed by birth but to some degree collectively enjoyed, being focussed in the village Geertz visited in four major endogamous descent groups, among whom antagonisms arise without this resulting in violence. Furthermore, when fights are between cocks representing different villages, internal divi-

sions are suppressed so that one village presents a united betting front against the other. In view of this, especially those fights between prestigious owners or groups take on the aura of symbolic battles, fictitiously loading the cocks with prestige that is then fictitiously won or lost according to the outcome. Against the civility of Balinese life and its abhorrence of direct aggression, a competitive side can be displayed without real consequence, because no prestige is actually at issue in the combat. Its redness of tooth and claw could be permitted into social life only suicidally.

Thus far, Geertz's interpretation seems headed toward functionalist conclusions and carries with it an implicit explanation. If fictitious prestige contests have import beyond the minor dramas played out in them, it might seem that they allow the expression of tensions in an innocuous form, with fowl taking the drubbing that would await people were the dramas removed from the stage and played out in community life. Yet though it seems clear that the Balinese sometimes place bets in ways that signal allegiance to or defection from kin groupings, and likewise clear that men are through their cocks placing reputations metaphorically on the line, and clear, finally, that the Balinese themselves interpret the outcomes as events within an economy of group or personal status (rather as in America where football or baseball teams carry the prestige of local supporters and either fumble or advance it), Geertz is not suggesting we look on cockfights as some moral equivalent of war. Nor does he rest content with viewing them as vehicles whereby the framework of affiliation and hostility constitutive in part of Balinese social structure is put on public display and read as such. Rather, the "function" of cockfighting is gradually cast into a quite different and more numinous arena where Balinese sensibility is being materialized for purposes of contemplation, edification, and cultural instruction. On this view,

Attending cockfights and participating in them is . . . a kind of sentimental education. What [a man] learns there is what his culture's ethos and his private sensibility (or, anyway, certain aspects of them) look like when spelled out externally in a collective text; that the two are near enough alike to be articulated in the symbols of a single such text; and — the disquieting part — that the text in which this revelation is accomplished consists of a chicken hacking another mindlessly to bits.¹²

Here what looked on the surface to be only a cockfight takes on the dimensions of an *éducation sentimentale* — with the allusion to Flaubert's novel quite clearly intended. Contests for rank and survival among poultry are being thrown into the higher realms of literature, as texts to be read just as we might read or attend *Macbeth* (as Geertz goes on to note). But what is it these *say*, granted they are about ethos and sensibility? Geertz's answer

exploits material I cannot fully review here, but the result shifts us further in the direction of the sublime:

Drawing on almost every level of Balinese experience, [the fight] brings together themes — animal savagery, male narcissism, opponent gambling, status rivalry, mass excitement, blood sacrifice — whose main connection is their involvement with rage and the fear of rage, and, binding them into a set of rules which at once contains them and allows them play, builds a symbolic structure in which, over and over again, the reality of their inner affiliation can be intelligibly felt . . . Enacted and re-enacted, so far without end, the cockfight enables the Balinese, as, read and re-read, *Macbeth* enables us, to see a dimension of his own subjectivity. As he watches fight after fight . . . he grows familiar with it and what it says to him, much as the attentive listener to string quartets . . . grows slowly more familiar with them in a way which opens his subjectivity to himself.¹³

Seen in this light, the cockfight-as-text integrates diverse themes around a central ambivalence toward rage, opening a door to the Balinese psyche by externalizing the structure of its sensibility, staging it before a people whose fascination with the theater and theatricality is well known. The addictiveness of cockfights is thus explained by their capacity to mirror the Balinese soul, and they are attended as a form of tutelage through which profound truths of a personal and cultural nature are slowly encountered and appropriated. Cockfights are canonical texts for the Balinese just because they are, when interpreted, so very Balinese, as *Faust*, for instance, is thought so very Occidental. As we understand this, the enigmatical surface of the expression disappears and the Balinese are revealed not as “crazy” or culturally schizophrenic, but quite like ourselves. The anthropological appropriation of the foreign is accomplished by making it appropriate.

This interpretation is indeed fascinating, and I should remark again that it draws together information about Balinese “culture and personality” I cannot consider. Yet we should be troubled by the imputation of Balinese motives it quite explicitly authorizes and that succeeds or fails in terms of rather straightforward empirical questions. Do these people attend cockfights *because* they learn about their sensibility in the process? Is this *their* reason for what would otherwise appear a less than elevating entertainment? Or is all this simply a “fiction of relation” Geertz has conceived in anthropological afterthought to make sense of the custom, weaving it into a web of significance? In the first place, that Geertz wants to explain *why* people attend fights is clear, since at another point in the essay he writes that “Balinese *go to cockfights* to find out what a man . . . feels like when, attacked . . . and driven to the extremes of fury, he has totally triumphed or been brought totally low.”¹⁴ Though exactly how this is to be

discerned from the behavior of chickens (if this is what is being claimed) remains obscure, what does seem evident is that tuition in culture and sensibility is what Geertz claims the Balinese seek in cockfights. Yet he offers no evidence of this and speaks of no informant using the fights as an occasion for reflections on sensibility, psyche, or soul. It is true that their message might be communicated subconsciously, so that a man who attends them would unwittingly grow more proficient at seeing “a dimension of his own subjectivity,” but Geertz makes no effort to establish this. The effect is implied but not demonstrated – as it could be, for instance, by seeing whether, independent of age, attendance at cockfights deepens native insight into sensibility. Failing this, there is simply no support in the essay for the notion that messages about being Balinese are being received by anyone other than Geertz.

Of course I am inviting a charge of literalism here; yet though Geertz admits to using phrases like “what the cockfight says” metaphorically,¹⁵ the rationale of his semiotic treatment rests on this being substantially more than a *façon de parler*. Otherwise the question before us simply boils down to one of whether the cockfights are somehow in tune with Balinese sensibility, and though this might be the case, claims of this sort have overwhelmingly tautological tendencies. The restrictions on reading between expression and sensibility are too weak to demonstrate anything in the absence of independent measures of both phenomena. The interpretation of the cockfight itself, for instance, seems to be the primary evidence that the Balinese sensibility is centrally articulated around “rage and its denial.” In fact, according to Geertz’s criteria for reading this into the cockfights, one might argue that any violent sport circumscribed by rules would “express” the same ambivalence.

One naturally hesitates to dispute these matters from the armchair, but there are convincing reasons why in the absence of supporting evidence we should not entertain Geertz’s textualization and the motives it imputes to the Balinese. Some of these are ethnographic; others are based on commonsensical generalizations from our own experience with texts. On the ethnographic side we might note that cockfighting as a species of blood sport is quite broadly distributed across cultures and is pursued in many of these with a zeal over which the Balinese have no monopoly. A cursory review of the literature suggests the pastime is currently endemic throughout much of Southeast Asia and certainly proves to be as addictive in the Philippines as it does in Bali, though the cultural differences between these two sites are enormous.¹⁶ In view of this, it is not immediately clear that the specific Balinese fascination with the fights is something that needs

to be accounted for. (Of course what goes on in them might be “coded” differently in each culture and thus tell a different “story” to each local clientele, but this supposition simply highlights the paucity of evidence Geertz has provided for the notion that they tell a story in the first place.) The distribution of the pastime furthermore suggests how awkward it would be to explain the Balinese case by subconscious resonances between “text” and public, because the former seems to “resonate” successfully across cultures and personalities.

On the commonsensical side, I would point to a problem that results from the frequency with which the cockfight-as-text is repeated. In our experience of theater we simply cannot bear this sort of redundancy and monotony, however sublime the message. Thus on the surface of it there is something specious about Geertz’s allusions to Shakespeare, Flaubert, and string quartets, because whatever insights into our subjectivity we gain through such works, these do not cause us to read or attend them over and over again. Perhaps, however, we could salvage the textual metaphor by scaling the allusions down, calling now on Punch and Judy shows, mystery plays, or the *arlecchinos* of *commedia dell’arte*, all of which are enjoyed for their formulaic qualities. Yet the redundancy of the cockfights still seems excessive in comparison.¹⁷ To generalize with abandon, no dramatic text bears the frequency of repetition we find here unless supported by externalities of one sort or another, perhaps religious or obsessive. But though the cockfights are loosely connected with Balinese religion, Geertz’s ethnography gives us no reason to equate them with, say, the Catholic Mass. On the other hand, if the Balinese are obsessed, it hardly seems likely that what they are obsessed with is opening their subjectivity to reflection. Whichever way we go with the cockfight-as-text, it seems to entail consequences, at least on the basis of our own experience, that it does not have in Geertz’s ethnographic reporting. Taken seriously, his argument for a textual cockfight would turn the Balinese into “redundancy-freaks,” mesmerized by a single document and the constancy of its repetition. Consequently, this confrontation with the enigmatical winds up making the Balinese as foreign to us as they began, or perhaps more so.

Looking on the matter somewhat differently, we can argue that the *possibility* of indigenous readings similar to Geertz’s always exists for the cockfight.¹⁸ This may be seen by comparing it not with the works of Shakespeare, Flaubert, or Beethoven, but rather with occult or divinatory practices. In these a split sometimes develops between popular and elite rationales. In the former a practice is seen as having some capacity to act on the world, as alchemy offers to turn lead into gold or the *I Ching* to

advise us about appropriate courses of action. In the elite view, however, such an interpretation is vulgar: the occult practice has no power to act on the world, but rather aims at the development and exploration of subjectivity or spirituality. The *I Ching* has had this elite reading in China at least since the thirteenth century, just as have, at various times and places, alchemy, tarot, horoscopy, and the rest. Both popular and elite approaches depend on coding the practice, but the elite code is both considerably richer and considerably more obscure, calling for active interpretation rather than the simple telling of signs. Nothing prevents the Balinese from treating cockfights similarly, developing a tradition whereby minor aspects of the battles might come to signify deep and fascinating mysteries. But as there is no evidence they have done so to date, one may well wonder how Geertz's explication acquires greater standing than an argument that we attend baseball or soccer matches to delve into our own subjectivity. On the contrary: were Bali not an exotic site, his interpretation would be considered as far-fetched as any subjectivist textual treatment of Western sporting events. One rarely errs in presuming such notions specious, *prima facie*.

We meet in Geertz's analysis of deep play, it would seem, the sort of double conflation referred to earlier — on the one hand between the anthropologist's construal of significance and the native's, and on the other between significance and signification. The resulting treatment of the "text" seems an example less of thick *description* than of a particular aesthetic wherein the sublime possibilities always latent in complex cultural practices are activated for the edification to be had. Turning cockfights into stories the Balinese tell themselves about themselves extends the sphere of textuality beyond publicly coded documents, and thus into a realm where cracking the "code" is apt mainly to reveal the sensibility of the cryptographer. Of necessity the process is a sort of private divination, not unlike Saussure's search for anagrammatic messages in Latin poetry. The perception of some meaning that, though only vaguely traceable, appears to knit together disparate orders of experience indeed activates sensations of sublimity, yet the nagging question remains whether this occurs commonly in Bali or perhaps only in the anthropological analysis. Consider in this light a further example.

In the essay "Art as a Cultural System,"¹⁹ a similar effect is achieved by slightly different means. At one point the discussion concerns the place of "line" in Yoruba sculpture and sensibility. Relying on the analysis of Robert Farris Thompson,²⁰ Geertz first notes that:

The vocabulary of linear qualities, which the Yoruba use colloquially and across a range of concerns far broader than sculpture, is nuanced and extensive. It is not just their statues, pots, and so on that the Yoruba incise with lines: they do the same with their faces [cicatricially] . . . But there is more to it than this. The Yoruba associate line with civilization: “This country has become civilized,” literally means, in Yoruba, “this earth has lines upon its face.”²¹

He then quotes Thompson’s text, where etymological and homonymic relations between various Yoruba terms are given: “civilization” is “the face lined with marks”; one word for incising facial scars also means “to clear the bush”; others have to do with cutting roads, marking boundaries, and plowing fields. Finally, as Thompson notes, “the basic verb to cicatrize (*lâ*) has multiple associations of imposing human pattern upon the disorder of nature . . . allowing the inner quality of [its] substance to shine forth.”²² With this in mind, Geertz comments that:

The intense concern of the Yoruba carver with line, and with particular forms of lines, stems therefore from rather more than a detached pleasure in its intrinsic properties, the problems of sculptural technique, or even some generalized cultural notion one could isolate as a native aesthetic. It grows out of a distinctive sensibility the whole of life participates in forming – one in which the meanings of things are the scars men leave on them.²³

Thus a consequence of line in Yoruba carving, Geertz goes on to note, is to “materialize a way of experiencing, bring a particular cast of mind out into the world of objects, where men can look at it.” The rhetorical strategy of this analysis is quite similar to the one on cockfighting. Here “line” spreads out associations to symbolize a distinctive sensibility and the whole of Yoruba life, though the device by which it does this is etymological and homonymic. In making lines on carvings and faces, as potentially in bordering properties, cutting paths in the bush of furrows in their fields, the Yoruba do not just *that*, but something characteristically Yoruba, alluding with each stroke to all others and thus to a modality of experience both sublime and uniquely theirs. The marks of scarification, path making, or agriculture constitute, as Geertz has it, “primary documents . . . conceptions themselves that seek – or for which people seek – a meaningful place in a repertoire of other documents, equally primary.”²⁴ These inscriptions or micro-texts are linguistically interrelated, with any line potentially registering its meaningful place in a network of allusions, not just infecundating it with significance, with “something rather more than . . . its intrinsic properties,” but with signifying agency.

Though more immediately plausible than the treatment of the cockfight, this argument is still quite vague as to its claims, several levels of which

can be distinguished. For convenience, let us confine ourselves to the case of sculpture, which in any event seems to offer the richest possibilities. Here a minimal claim would simply be that these carvings (or some of their properties) commonly have extra-aesthetic significance, though perhaps of an indeterminant sort such that connoisseurs would, much like our own art critics, impute quite varied meanings to them. In this case they would be expressive objects serving as foci for speculative construal as to significance. A somewhat stronger claim would be that specific qualities of sculptures are linked through a code to other realms of Yoruba experience in such a way that relatively determinant information about that experience can be read off the figurines. Here certain of their properties could be said to *signify* in addition to merely having significance. Still more strongly – and more nearly approximating the apparent thrust of Geertz’s discussion – the full complex of sculptural qualities might serve emblematically, perhaps aided by resonance with other “inscriptive” media, to instantiate and thus to materialize some unique global experience or “cast of mind” that we would expect to be commented upon in sculptural appreciation. In such a case figurines might be judged better or worse in terms of their relative success in bringing all this “out into the world of objects, where men can look at it.” Finally, and here going somewhat beyond what Geertz directly suggests, Yoruba carving might have both lexical and grammatical properties in result of which sculptors could communicate varied messages about their cast of mind to connoisseurs – in which case the medium would be fully linguistic by any standard.

Granted the aesthetic eloquence of Yoruba sculpture and the longevity of the tradition of which it is a part, to find evidence for even the strongest of these claims would not astonish us. Thus it is somewhat disappointing to encounter, at first sight, little support for any of them. On consulting Thompson’s essay, we find that the Yoruba “read” sculptural line in rather banal terms that give but minor indication of interests extending beyond the native aesthetic. Thompson solicited evaluations of sculpture from various Yoruba carvers and connoisseurs, isolating the major criteria utilized in judgment. One of these was “visibility,” a quality partly expressed through “linear precision” – meaning the clarity of definition in the knifework by which the eyes, mouths, fingers, coiffure, and so forth of the figurines were rendered. Appraisals of this quality were quite straightforward and unembellished. The sculptor Bandele, for instance, commented in criticizing a piece simply that “The mouth remains [unfinished?]; they have not lined it. They have not incised the sash. They have grooved it.”²⁵ Yoruba, whether sculptors, connoisseurs, or people in the street, recognize detailing and precision as properties that distinguish

good work from bad, and Thompson indeed suggests that “the notion of linear connoisseurship is highly developed among traditional Yoruba.”²⁶ It is in expanding on this that he draws on the terminology of scarification and notes the etymological relations between this and various words for civilization, the carving lexicon, marking borders, and so on. Yet these associations do not enter into the commentary he elicited, which did not rise above suggesting that in certain instances lines were “too faint” or perhaps “more visible” on one statue than another. Furthermore, Thompson’s own assessment is merely that the linear terminology, particularly in its relation to scarification, “sharpens the eye of the Yoruba critic and gives the sensitive non-carver the knack of talking about clarity of line with conviction.” Thus they are able to “defend their tastes when judging sculpture which does or does not satisfy local feelings about linear visibility.”²⁷

As we shall see in a moment, there is more to Yoruba sculpture than this, but in light of the expectations Geertz has raised, the framework in which it is commonly discussed seems quite prosaic. To hazard an analogy, it resembles the one in which certain connoisseurs among us appraise horse-flesh. Elaborate conventions have been established for this that can be taught to neophytes so as to make their estimations approximate those of experts. Thus judgments as to beauty of conformation can be broadly shared without this leading to suspicions of extra-aesthetic significance. More often than not, this is true of Yoruba sculpture as well: the quest for ulterior significance or encoded messages is simply missing. Were this always the case, the claims we have distinguished in Geertz’s argument would all lack support, but Thompson has made it clear to me in personal communication that sculpture can carry non-aesthetic import for the Yoruba, while certain of its properties have been codified so as to signify something for particular connoisseurs, though not necessarily about casts of mind. He writes, for instance, that:

a priest of divination spontaneously talked about the criterion of visibility and linked it to the discretion of spirit possession and dreams – if the spirits ‘come down’ or pass through a dream they have *fi ara hon*, made their body visible, meaning they want the issue they represent or carry made patent. *ko fi ara hon*, the opposite, means the god of fate does not want to show himself, and we will in dreams or divination “see another side which will not be relevant to the question.” Visibility to them is more than mere craftsmanship; it has to do with discretion and the very privilege of being told pure truths as opposed to necessary euphemisms.²⁸

Thus we can see that behind the criticisms of a sculptor like Bandele may lie realms of significance by which specific conventions acquire extra-aesthetic import. For at least some informants, visibility in sculpture is

linked to a dimension of spiritual experience characterized by degrees of revelation or, more accurately, by variable privilege in exposure to truth. In fact, the sense of a dimension of expressive potential beneath or beyond surface verisimilitude is, Thompson suggests, widespread among connoisseurs, for whom figurines are able to address “larger social issues, coded by stance and so forth.” The vocabulary through which this is done is shared by Yoruba at least within the precincts of the divination cult.

Rather as we would expect, then, Yoruba sculpture shows itself capable of serving as a focus for speculative inquiry into significance, and capable as well of conveying extra-aesthetic information. Exactly how widespread this is, or how it connects with the aesthetic and craftsmanly considerations that appear to dominate Yoruba artistic criticism, is unclear. In any event the evidence supports in certain contexts the weaker claims we have outlined with regard to Yoruba sculpture. As yet, however, we have encountered nothing that would support the stronger claim that carving materializes and makes public some global Yoruba experience or cast of mind. Indigenous commentary ignores this matter, and it is in fact rather difficult to see how such a notion could be advanced other than tautologically. Of course in their carving the Yoruba express a distinctive sensibility or cast of mind; but then they could hardly do otherwise, since to an external observer the conventions of sculpture are one of the things that make this sensibility distinctive in the first place. For the stronger claims to have much weight, we must be able to conceive of a specifically Yoruban cast of mind independent of and yet materializable through techniques that prove specifiable in practice. One can imagine referring to specific achievements in sculpture as “characteristically Yoruban” in the same sense we sometimes refer to movies like *“Jules et Jim”* as characteristically French, but neither Geertz’s discussion nor the ethnographic information on which it is based give us any sense of how to go about this. In fact, the very notion that a “whole way of life” might motivate concern with sculptural line or more generally be expressed through a material medium is both conceptually and methodologically troublesome. Conceptually, we must wonder whether too much doesn’t get into too little in too vague a way; methodologically, the problem invites us to conceive of unlikely thought experiments in which blind Yoruba, suddenly given sight and confronted with a variety of sculptural styles, unerringly identify their own on the basis of recognizable (or easily learned) correspondences between their cast of mind and the material concretion before them. Perhaps such a thought experiment creates too strong a criterion for the admissibility of a textual claim, but without some independent delineation of sensibility and of the rules by which it is made corporeal, the matter founders in tau-

tology – and even as a tautology it badly strains the available evidence. The distance between Bandele’s commentary and the freight Geertz would have Yoruba sculpture carry, though lessened by Thompson’s helpful clarifications, is still too great.

The difficulty here is the same we confronted in the case of the cockfight: a not evidently linguistic medium is first conceived of as textual and then hypothesized to encode information, at once enormously complex and vague, about sensibility. We can grant that in making lines on faces, fields, and figurines, the Yoruba at some level signal the incorporation of flesh, earth, and wood into the fabric of culture; grant further that all of this is distinctive and has considerable significance for the Yoruba; and yet balk at the notion that carvers are intensely concerned with particular forms of lines *because* these act as vehicles for bringing a particular cast of mind out into the world of objects. Though we would be much less surprised were this the case than were cockfights to be stories the Balinese told themselves about themselves, if we formulate Geertz’s argument non-tautologically it presents us with a picture that transcends the ethnographic evidence. Encouraged to visualize sculptors bent over their work beset by the difficulty of etching their sensibility into a plastic form (and connoisseurs anxious to assess their achievement in this regard), we find the whole “system” rather less auto-referential. A large part of the carvers’ “intense concern with line” can probably be accounted for by the interaction of traditional aesthetic norms with an interest in earning a living and a reputation by meeting them. Other, less pragmatic concerns do indeed subtend this activity, but need not (and often do not) enter either the sculptural or the appreciative process. As in any culture there are on hand etymological resonances and allusive possibilities by which a synthetic if inexact interpreter, indigenous or anthropological, can knit rich meanings into the scars people leave on things, but just how these inform the concrete activity of Yoruba sculptors or the assessments of critics is as yet underspecified. To take an example from our own heritage, we find that in Germany, for instance, around the turn of the century, the etymological associations of the Latin words *cultus* (cult, cultivator, and culture itself) and *civis* (city-dwelling, civility, and civilization) were activated so that battles could be fought between the advocates of *Kultur* on the one hand and *Zivilization* on the other, but it would be a mistake to infer that these resonances affected the daily lives of urbanites or farmers. Apart from such episodes, etymologies are normally quiescent socially and culturally. Avoiding factitious speculation here may indeed rob daily life of a depth it would no doubt have were the histories of words present in our reasons for acting, but as they normally aren’t, it seems best to forego the pleasures

of the sublime in the interests of descriptive accuracy.

Standing back from the specifics here, the real difficulty we face is how to do justice to the truth in Weber's argument that, as Geertz put it earlier, "the imposition of meaning on life is the major end and primary condition of human existence" yet still remaining ethnographically and sociologically sober. One clear requirement, as argued before, is that we distinguish between the activity of afterthought whereby meaning is imposed on expressive life and the sort of forethought whereby actors manipulate publicly coded media so as to convey messages. The utility of treating culture as a text is evident only in the latter case, because there the presumption of authorship, message, and reader will make some sense of the cultural goings-on. Elsewhere these suppositions, which carry with them an imagery of intentional coherence, design, and therefore intelligibility, will threaten to substitute afterthoughts, whether native or anthropological, for the actual historical causes accounting for native practices. Stripped of the metaphors of textuality, culture often turns out to be saying very little. In mistaking meaning-as-significance for meaning-as-signification, we threaten to find that cultural practices of diverse and mundane origins acquire an integrity and profundity normally reserved for art, for those intentionally symbolic phenomena that are commonly seen as "wholes" or "totalities." In the process, cultural practices become pregnant with a (not always perspicuous) meaning that occasionally violates our own common experience of culture.

Having noted this, however, we must admit that important aspects of exotic cultures (as of our own) sometimes *are* symbolically integrated and that the desire to maintain systemic coherence may govern the organization or stylistics of cultural production. For a descriptive anthropology to ignore this would be as pragmatically fatal as suspending itself in illusory webs of significance. In these circumstances we must be able to show that the symbolic significance is native and that it is more than the product of a casual and perhaps idiosyncratic native afterthought. In discussing sacred symbols and their function in ordering experience, for instance, Geertz quotes a Sioux informant on the place of the circle in the Oglala weltanschauung:

The Oglala believe the circle to be sacred because the great spirit caused everything in nature to be round except stone. Stone is the implement of destruction . . . For these reasons the Oglala make their *tipis* circular, their camp-circle circular, and sit in a circle at all ceremonies. The circle is also the symbol of the *tipi* and of shelter. If one makes a circle for an ornament and it is not divided in any way, it should be understood as the symbol of the world and of time.²⁹

Here the circle is coded for meaning quite explicitly in the cosmology of an informant and perhaps for the Sioux generally. We might find that the production of ornaments is governed by this figure and quite unintelligible otherwise. On the other hand, it would probably be prudent to assume that *tipis* are circular for practical reasons quite independent of the symbolism by which this has become bound in native afterthought. In any event, we accept circularity as a major orienting theme for the Sioux first because it is a Sioux who is our informant and then because we know our own expressive lives are occasionally governed by similar themes. But the anthropological difficulty is that significance of this sort can be spun at the drop of a hat by anyone with the talent or vision required. To cite an example nearer to home, the essayist Michael Novak recently suggested that baseball is a “Lockean game” embodying the principles of *The Federalist Papers*.³⁰ Without wishing to disparage the quality of vision here, it seems clear that any social scientist who used Novak’s insights to explain the origins, development, or popularity of baseball in America would have a tough row to hoe. Yet suppose a naive ethnographer from a foreign culture happened upon Novak as an informant?

Such a question is only partly facetious. We are just beginning to consider the dynamics and character of ethnographic informing generally, wondering whether, for instance, the persistent hectoring of natives by anthropologists who are often convinced everything must have a reason and that all reasons in exotic societies must hang together, produces spurious responses and artificial significance.³¹ Nor do we know to what degree the understandable preference of ethnographers for voluble informants, who often seem to “discover” quite a bit about their culture in the process of retailing it for an interlocutor, affects the picture as eventually written up for monographic consumption.³² We do suspect, however, that the genre of the monograph itself has developed certain rhetorical devices for establishing its authority, one of which is the mastery and control suggested by an integral interpretation of native culture.³³ Nor is this simply a requisite for persuasiveness: ethnography in general, as an artifact of our own expressive life, may carry to and from the field a prejudice for “totalities,” an assumption that in contrast to the fragmentation experienced as constitutive of complex societies, the cultures of the simpler ones are “still” knit together, and not just in their central symbolic domains but everywhere (and in such a way that each native gesture is always “rather more than” its intrinsic properties would suggest). In working up exotic societies in such terms, ethnography produces profundity, whether through sublime symbols or allusive webs of etymological significance, catering in the process to a generalized nostalgia for wholeness as well as to the literary

demands we place on anthropological writing. But in consequence the possibility that exotic societies have their own fragmentation, or paper it over only by ad hoc speculation that is false to the actual historical origins of their practices, is overlooked. By means of analogical vision we might be able to make a seamless web of our own culture, though no one would grant it more credence than Novak's intriguing similes between Locke, baseball, and *The Federalist Papers*. Yet as soon as the boundary is crossed between our culture and others, the skepticism – indeed, derision – with which we treat our own visionaries is turned upside down, and native speculation (or perhaps even flummery) turned into ethnographic fact.

The process by which such facts, when enigmatic, are woven into a world-view for monographic consumption entails obvious problems. Dan Sperber has suggested, for instance, that some of the Western perception of the “irrationality” of primitive notions resulted from mistaking metaphoric and sometimes casual remarks for the sort of *beliefs* intellectuals would expect to justify and make consistent within a system – more or less as if they were Descartes. Thus in monographs “All native utterances get distilled together; their quintessence is then displayed as a homogeneous world-view where, indeed, no epistemological differentiation of belief occurs. This, however, is a fact of ethnography, not of culture.”³⁴ When components of this integrated schema prove deeply enigmatic, elaborate interpretive excrescences are created to show how, if one were a native, the beliefs would “make sense.” For instance, as Sperber notes, the alleged claim of Bororo men of the central Amazon to the effect that they were red macaws, first recorded by Von den Steinen in 1894, “became a favorite example of the primitive's departure from Western common-sense rationality.”³⁵ Later, when denigrating primitive habits of thought had fallen out of fashion, the puzzle was taken up by relativist commentators who tried to show how being a bird fit well with Bororo cultural logic. A minor literature grew around the topic, to which Geertz himself has contributed. Relying on W. Percy's apparently totemic analysis,³⁶ he has distinguished between “religious” and “common-sensical” contexts in which this macaw-belief (here parakeets) might be held:

In the religious, our Bororo is ‘really’ a ‘parakeet,’ and given the proper ritual context might well ‘mate’ with other ‘parakeets’ – with metaphysical ones like himself. . . . In the commonsensical perspective . . . he belongs to a clan whose members regard the parakeet as a totem . . . [Thus] a man who says he is a parakeet is . . . saying that . . . he is shot through with parakeetness and that this religious fact has some crucial implications. . . .³⁷

But as J. C. Crocker found by going back to the Bororo, such difficult

notions as being shot through with parakeetness in the metaphysical domain may not actually be called for: the men do not *believe* they are birds, but rather use them as a metaphor “expressing the irony of their masculine condition” in a society governed by matrilineal descent and uxorilocal residence, wherein woman happen to keep macaws as pets.³⁸ Perhaps it would be more interesting otherwise, just as it would be more interesting were we to find that Yoruba carvers, in setting knife to wood, were beset by the difficulty of etching their sensibility into a plastic form.

My point is not that most exotic practices have mundane and commonsensical explications that anthropologists ignore, but simply that there are a variety of avenues by which the factitiously peculiar and sublime on occasion slips into anthropological interpretation. Not all of these depend upon textualization, as the above example indicates. An impulse to profundity exists in anthropology quite independently of Geertz’s methodological program, having previously expressed itself in radical versions of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, for instance. Novalis long ago suggested that the function of poetry should not be just to make the strange familiar, but to reverse the process, turning the everyday into the foreign, and anthropology has been subject to this dialectic as well. Defamiliarization performs a very real service that I shall allude to in a moment, but one might argue it does not contribute much to an empirical understanding of culture, whether this involves a pragmatic grasp of its reasons or causes, or of the native perceptions of significance that are deployed in afterthought to make sense of the chaos of experience. Generally, infusions of the sublime simply make culture appear as our elite contemplatives would have it, as something rich enough to express a refined sensibility — and textuality of late has been the primary vehicle by which such a sensibility reads itself into the cultural materials at hand. The effect of such a bias is not very fruitfully discussed in the abstract, but it appears part of a broader mode of totalizing discourse through which authority is granted insight in the measure that it masters diversity and constructs coherence, providing that *Zusammenhang* after which the *Geisteswissenschaften* have always hankered. It seems clear that textualizing the object of our inquiry, so that each non-semantic gesture is presumed to inscribe meanings, will occasionally impute an integrity to culture that it does not necessarily have. Cockfights, for instance, may be attended for a variety of reasons that need not sum to a symbolic unity, however indefinite of outline. Behind the presumption of textuality is that of an author, an architectural intelligence coordinating symbols and sentences so that they hang together, achieving a sensual or intelligible effect. Yet how viable the notion of authorship is when applied to culture as a collective phenome-

non, as an ensemble of inscriptions, voices, or simply practices, each perhaps with its own distinctive character, remains in question. What Mikhail Bakhtin termed “heteroglossia,” a fragmentation of discourse between points of view that need not add up from any overall vantage, is not anticipated by semiotic anthropology, and because of the facility with which it weaves webs of significance, is not found.³⁹

The instances I have reviewed here do not warrant skepticism about interpretive anthropology per se, but rather about the specific strategies Geertz adopts to make culture tell a tale. These seem less to demonstrate a pragmatic utility for textualization than to undermine it. One might argue that where Geertz goes wrong he has usually ignored one of his own strictures, particularly as regards the necessarily public nature of meanings. But what is more generally troubling is that these strictures are in practice never very clear and seem to be treated cavalierly. In *The Interpretation of Cultures* Geertz argues that his explications are fictional, but only “in the sense that they are ‘something made,’ ‘something fashioned’ . . . not that they are false, unfactual, or merely ‘as if’ thought experiments.”⁴⁰ In this he calls us back to Vico’s formula for *fantasia* as the imaginative faculty by which we hope to enter the so-called “worlds” of others. Yet doubt is cast on the empirical aim of this fictional activity by a later passage where Geertz argues that:

to commit oneself to a semiotic concept of culture and an interpretive approach to the study of it is to commit oneself to a view of ethnographic assertion as, to borrow W. B. Gallie’s by now famous phrase, “essentially contestable.” Anthropology, or at least interpretive anthropology, is a science whose progress is marked less by a perfection of consensus than by a refinement of debate. What gets better is the precision with which we vex each other.⁴¹

Having tried to vex Geertz myself here, I would still argue that my aim has not so much been “precision” as agreement over whether, for instance, the Balinese go to cockfights to read about their sensibility. Such matters are not essentially contestable because they fail to meet the criteria Gallie lays down.⁴² In fact, to throw interpretive discourse into such a framework is to claim that there are no means by which the factual domain could bear on judgment. Whether the Balinese do or do not attend fights for certain reasons is not the same order of question as whether Lenin’s mantle should be seen as falling on Stalin or perhaps on Trotsky. The latter is an essentially contested issue because one cannot develop consensus over the criteria for being a proper inheritor. To conflate the two sorts of question is in the end to suggest that facts do not matter and that interpretation occupies the sphere of fiction tout court. Yet this would be an awkward conclusion for interpretive anthropology.

Looked at from another angle, we can suggest that the distinction Geertz sometimes draws between “laws and causes” social science and his own semiotic stance is artificial.⁴³ Unless he restricts himself to providing paraphrases of cultural texts on the basis of evidence entirely internal to them, he will necessarily enter the field of motivations, giving *reasons* for the production and reception of texts and showing why they say one thing rather than another. Though this activity would be descriptive rather than a search for laws, it is nonetheless concerned with causes.⁴⁴ To look upon the latter as essentially contestable would simply be to strike the science from the social sciences. This does not seem to be quite what Geertz intends: rather, he would advance semiotics as a way of formulating better hypotheses about causes, though his particular biases on occasion yield, as I have tried to show, worse ones.

Yet if Geertz’s openness to the sublime sometimes interferes with his descriptive obligations, it also underscores certain functions of the imagination. We know that art has the capacity to expand the vocabulary of experience we use in gaining access to significance, finding it thereby enriched, and in this guise textualization has the power to reflect back on the world it presumes to describe, perhaps changing the motives that cause people to act. Any Yoruba sculptor encountering Geertz’s comments on line might become enthusiastic about the semantic potential in carving, just as any Bororo might enjoy the prospect of being shot through with parakeetness. And from the perspective of Mallarmé’s poetics, there is nothing that prevents each Balinese *coup de poule* (so to speak) from emitting a thought as enigmatic and sublime as *Un coup de dés*. For the cockfight to take on such a role, the Balinese need only read Mallarmé on the one hand and establish a rich semantic code for the fights on the other. Of course these are unlikely prospects, but in consistently pointing to them Geertz awakens us to the less pedestrian potentials in culture, to the ways it might be turned into an even more interesting book. If the result is less science than what Richard Rorty calls “edifying discourse,”⁴⁵ it reveals both the advantages and the disabilities that come of writing in the space between descriptive anthropology and fiction.

Throughout this critique I have made certain assumptions about the nature of anthropology and the place of interpretation within it that should be made explicit and argued for by way of conclusion. In the first place I have simply taken for granted that anthropology is a discipline in which both observation and hypothesis rely on evidential support whose quality it is the purpose of a skeptical and thus conservative community to assess by prevailing standards. As in the sciences in general, in historical studies,

or in courts of law, I expect anthropological interpretation to offer plausible constructions of “data” over which some sort of communal scrutiny can be exercised, and to do so in ways that accept long-standing if occasionally unformalized criteria of argument. These latter range from highly general notions like the principle of non-contradiction to such considerably more specific desiderata as that claims about subconscious communication be supported by adequate evidence.

Though I would expect widespread support for this position, it has never been endorsed universally by social scientists, and for at least three reasons. The first – never worked up as a theoretical matter – is simple impatience with the conservatism of empirical disciplines in the face of intriguing problems or weighty concerns. In the nineteenth century, for instance, hypotheses from the hands of various scholars about the origins of religion commonly ignored recognized standards of argument in scientific affairs.⁴⁶ The degree of speculative abandon thus reached now constitutes a curious episode in intellectual history, though even in our own century one can point to anthropological interpretations arrived at only by evading such canonical notions as that like causes should have like effects.⁴⁷ In fact there has always been and will presumably always be a segment of the discipline frustrated by and thus cavalier toward not just the methodological rigors of science, but toward the basic argumentative norms required of any “science” whatsoever, without which our hope of gaining warrant for our statements – warrant that might produce eventual consensus and cumulative understanding – is lost.

A second position, which we see present in Rousseau, surfacing on occasion with Boas and his school, but brought to center stage of late, places anthropology ultimately in the service of moral or aesthetic goals in relation to which scientific norms are either ancillary or irrelevant. To cite a recent and exemplary case, Stephen Tyler, in a manifesto for “post-modernist” ethnography, suggests anthropological fieldwork should result in a:

cooperatively evolved text consisting of fragments of discourse intended to evoke in the minds of both reader and writer an emergent fantasy of a possible world of commonsense reality, and thus to provoke an aesthetic integration that will have a therapeutic effect. It is, in a word, poetry – not in its textual form, but in its return to the original context and function of poetry, which, by means of its performative break with everyday speech, evoked memories of the *ethos* of the community and thereby provoked hearers to act ethically....⁴⁸

In view of this therapeutic aim, concern over empirical warrant would pos-

sibly be misplaced and perhaps even incoherent. Post-modernist ethnography belongs to the realm of edification, where, in Rorty's view, ways are proposed by which we cope with those human problems for which science offers us no aid. Surely the issue of how one best shows respect for the Other, which post-modernism places at the core of anthropology, is not one to which the criterion of empirical warrant is germane.

The third and most significant rationale has developed within the debate, now so aged, over the status of the *Geisteswissenschaften* in relation to the sciences. Since the time of the neo-Kantians, a continuing effort has been underway to establish a mode of sociocultural analysis that would be free of the argumentative conventions of the natural sciences and yet still legitimately "scientific." Thus a series of distinctions has been drawn – as between idiographic and nomothetic inquiries, between human action as an object of study and mere behavior, or between *Verstehen* as a method and the "external" or objectivizing strategies of the natural sciences – that together aim to segregate a subject matter and a research strategy that can stand proudly alongside naturalistic inquiry, and yet not be subject to the standards of evidence involved therein.⁴⁹ From the point of view of naturalistic inquiry, this is merely a licence for mischief, and of late it has forwarded itself under the banner of "interpretive social science."⁵⁰

So perennial is the issue and so deep the differences in intellectual sensibility that maintain it that we clearly cannot expect to see it resolved by argument. Each side believes it has exposed the other to devastating critique and is understandably downcast to find that its opponent, like Hydra, seems to sprout new heads as soon as the present complement have been lopped off. The maze of mutual incomprehension that has developed can be approached now only with a certain fatigue, but I want to conclude by drawing on my previous discussion to offer yet another sketch of the state of affairs. At its center, I believe, is a disagreement about the place of *significance* – recall that we are using this term in the sense of "the significance of the Holocaust" or "the significance of the Beatles" – in our understanding of society or culture. From the point of view of Weber, significance (as ethno-interpretation) was an object of scientific investigation but not its "objective": science itself had nothing (and could have nothing) to say about what things "meant." On the contrary: it was the prime mechanism by which the very notion of "meaning" was being subtracted from certain segments of the world – a process Weber called "disenchantment."⁵¹

For some hermeneuticians and interpretive social scientists, however, the “discovery” of significance is a central ambition: for them, a discipline unable to address questions like “what the Holocaust meant” would simply not be suitable as a vocation. Why this is so – why “meaning” is so prized and thus seductive a phenomenon – should be evident: it opens up a realm of understanding where intuitions about the human condition, for instance, become possible. And at a less grandiose level, it raises the prospect that we might understand what it “means” to be other than we are: what it is, for instance, that constitutes the essence of being Balinese.⁵² To have such intuitions become the matter of a science would, were it possible, extend them authority, blunting our suspicion (or conviction) that they are irreducibly fictive and idiosyncratic – which is another way of saying “enchanted.”

At bottom the issue is whether the cultural sciences should *study* webs of significance or set about *creating* them. The latter can be done if we blur disciplinary distinctions or genres of writing as Geertz has lately recommended, creating a netherworld between the fictive and the empirical. In this space a certain sort of talk can occur that, it turns out, most of us engage in casually on occasion. Let me draw an example from Geertz’s own essay on genre blurring, subtitled “The Refiguration of Social Thought.” There he cites an unusual array of instances, provided by thinkers from Sartre to Casteneda, of a “jumbling of varieties of discourse” now so advanced in our culture that “one waits only for quantum theory in verse or biography in algebra.” Though some of this jumbling has always gone on, Geertz concludes that its supposed recent increase represents:

a phenomenon general enough and distinctive enough to suggest that what we are seeing is not just another redrawing of the cultural map . . . but an alteration of the principles of mapping. Something is happening to the way we think about the way we think.⁵³

Though Geertz is characteristically vague about just what is happening to the way we think about the way we think, this sort of talk is of a very respectable, “pre-blurred” genre: quasi-empiricism. Geertz is here building a fiction of relation that may cause us to “see” certain phenomena in a new way, as having a significance anent the “refiguration of social thought” we had not previously fathomed; yet this “seeing” requires us to assume an empirical state of affairs: the very refiguration Geertz is conjuring up. Unless we agree that “something is happening” – which I don’t – the web of examples Geertz has woven frays and ceases to make sense. Yet the rules governing this sort of talk prevent us from calling on him to *demonstrate* what he clearly intends we consider only casually: to do

so – to call for some empirical measure of genre blurring, to ask that it be applied to a representative sample of thinkers, and so on and so forth – would simply be tactless, a mistaking of the genre of discourse. Significance of the sort Geertz is after here is always constructed by pseudo-referential means and thrives on a sort of modal ambiguity: it seems clear that we are not to hector it with demands for evidential warrant, and yet its force would be lost if its constitutive or fictive nature were fully and publicly underscored. Significance, once spun, must appear not to have been spun at all, but rather *discovered*. Without this mimetic or referential cast to its rhetoric, its persuasiveness would be diminished. On the other hand, it cannot highlight its empirical pretensions if the consequence is to arouse demands for empirical warrant. Thus it is necessarily stuck in a netherworld of its own making.

My point is not that there is something amiss with this talk, its modal ambiguity, or its quasi-empiricism: that is simply the way significance is produced. But if we blur the distinction between this and anthropology – which is what Geertz does – difficulties arise. In his writing there is no difference between that type of talk where to complain about want of evidence would be a social blunder and the one he uses to explicate the Balinese cockfight. Thus we are encouraged to forbear as much when Geertz says that people find in cockfights “a Balinese reading of Balinese experience” as when he says that “something is happening to the way we think about the way we think.” Yet what must be granted in casual talk about significance can only fatally be extended to a description of Balinese motives that is on its surface specious. The result would be to enchant our understanding of culture, populating it with factitious motivational entities little different from spooks or hobgoblins. In this regard the result of interpretive social science is, quite directly, mystification.

As Mallarmé, Novalis, and many others have recognized, mystification has its place in the project by which human significance is created, and particularly in its most sublime accomplishments. That is one reason why estimates of the “import” of human experience are essentially contestable. Surely this is something to be thankful for, because otherwise the richness of life might eventually succumb to what Keats once called “the touch of cold Philosophy.” Perhaps it is dismay at such a prospect (however unlikely) that stimulates some interpretive social scientists to blur genres and attempt to enchant science; yet from Weber’s point of view this would simply be an oxymoron. The creation of human significance is an enterprise that properly belongs to the realm of edification, and to confuse this with empirical inquiry would be to cast over the latter that pall of night in which

all cows, being of disputable color, might just as well be black. If one ignores Geertz's more fanciful interpretations and programmatic statements, there is much evidence from his distinguished career that this is not the outcome he wishes for anthropology – but it certainly wouldn't hurt if he clarified the issue rather than consistently blurring it.

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Notes

1. Dan Sperber, *Rethinking Symbolism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975).
2. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 5. Hereafter cited as *Interpretation*.
3. As Kant suggested, sublime phenomena by their very magnitude elude full comprehension causing us to lose our bearings without at the same time evoking in us a fear of being *really* lost (see the "Analytic of the Sublime" in *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment*.) We encounter sublimity whenever we sense coherence, albeit intuitively and only vaguely, in experience that would otherwise overwhelm us in the pure flux of randomness – as when we believe events to be fated in a way we are nevertheless unable to explicate in detail. Naturally, then, sublime phenomena present a difficulty for anthropological description in that nothing very precise can be said about them. But more importantly, the process by which seemingly non-linguistic goings-on are turned into texts in semiotic anthropology permits almost anything to be seen on analogy to William Blake's "grain of sand." In other words, the longer we contemplate some event or practice, the more numinous and sublime it can seem.
4. For previous work critical of Geertz's methods, see William Roseberry, "Balinese Cock-fights and the Seduction of Anthropology," *Social Research*, 49 (Winter, 1982), 1013–1028; Paul Shankman, "The Thick and the Thin: on the Interpretive Theoretical Program of Clifford Geertz," *Current Anthropology*, 25 (June, 1984), 261–270, as well as ensuing discussion through subsequent issues; Jonathan Lieberman, "Interpreting the Interpreter," *The New York Review of Books* XXXI: 4 (March 15, 1984); and Vincent Crapanzano, "Hermes Dilemma: The Masking of Subversion in Ethnographic Description," in James Clifford and George Marcus, editors, *Writing Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).
5. *Interpretation*, 10.

6. See Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967). The term “fiction” in Kermode’s phrase should not be understood pejoratively: the theories and hypotheses of the sciences are as much “fictions of relation” as are the interpretive schemes of hermeneuticians. The difference lies only in the conventions by which these hypotheses achieve their warrant.
7. See also Geertz’s comment that “Interpretive explanation – and it is a form of explanation, not just exalted glossography – trains its attention on what institutions, actions, images, utterances, events, customs, all the usual objects of social-scientific interest, *mean to those whose institutions, actions, customs, and so on they are.*” (“Blurred Genres: The Refiguration of Social Thought,” in Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge* [New York: Basic Books, 1983], 22, emphasis mine.)
8. “Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight” was originally published in *Daedalus* 101 (1972) and has been reprinted in *Interpretive Social Science*, editors Paul Rabinow and William Sullivan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979) as well as in *Interpretation*.
9. *Interpretation*, 432–433.
10. *Ibid.*, 434.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*, 449.
13. *Ibid.*, 449–451.
14. *Ibid.*, 450.
15. Geertz claims that the function of the cockfight “is interpretive: it is a Balinese reading of Balinese experience, a story they tell themselves about themselves;” but then goes on to add, in a discussion I do not find particularly helpful, that “such an extension of the notion of a text beyond written material, and even beyond verbal, is, though metaphorical, not of course, all that novel” (*ibid.*, 448–449). He mentions the tradition of reading Nature as a text and refers casually to Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud, concluding that textualizing non-linguistic culture is “theoretically undeveloped . . . and has yet to be systematically exploited.” Perhaps this is with good reason.
16. To my knowledge there is no comparative ethnography of cockfighting. It certainly appears to be popular in the Philippines, where a periodical (“Sabong”) and a promotional literature have developed (as an example of the latter, see particularly Angel Lansang, *Cockfighting in the Philippines* [Baguio City: Catholic School Press, 1966], of which more later.) I have seen references to cockfighting in northern Malaysia, while in Sarawak (Malaysian Borneo) it seems to be as popular as in Bali. James Barclay noted in *A Stroll Through Borneo* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1980) that cockfights highlight the lengthy parties given by the Iban people, and are in that circumstance “undertaken with fanatical zest by birds and men alike” (18). I believe a serious review of the literature would find addiction to cockfighting (and governmental perception of it as a vice) general throughout the area, though the cultures vary quite dramatically. At any rate there is no evidence that Iban personality is particularly concerned with the same issues as the Balinese.
17. Compare, however, Janice Radway’s interesting *Reading the Romance* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), where formulaic fiction is shown to be consumed in quite astonishing quantities. While I am not convinced by Radway’s psychoanalytic explanation of this habit, her research is in other respects a model of the patient attention to ethno-interpretation required if we are to understand why people are attracted to a particular genre of cultural product. Precisely how one might draw an analogy between Harlequin romances and cockfighting is unclear, but even were one to see individual cockfights as enjoyably varied instances of a constant theme or plot,

as the romances clearly are, we would be left with the problem of explaining what is specifically Balinese in them.

18. In fact I have found an instance of this for cockfighting, though from the Philippines. Lansang (cited above, n. 16), in trying to promote the fights both as a tourist attraction and as a "national sport" not borrowed from colonial overlords, writes that "If there is any aspect of Philippines life that can really appeal to tourists, that is certainly cockfighting. Our national sport . . . is not only an institution, it is a way of life. In fact the sport is . . . closely bound up with our sensibilities and is patently considered an integral part of our cultural evolution . . . [because in them] our passionate nature really finds expression . . . In a very real sense, cockfighting reflects our true culture as a people. It is here that our real selves comes to the surface" (17). With regard to this, let me note that the sensibility Lansang finds revealed in the fights is not so much in the behavior of the fowl as in the honesty, sportsmanship, and passion the human actors show around the pit; and that it would be as much a mistake to assume that the average Filipino attends cockfights to see his "real self" expressed as it would be to assume Americans attend baseball games for the same reasons as Roger Angell. At any rate, it seems cockfights can express Filipino sensibility as easily as Balinese – which renders spurious the specific equation Geertz draws.
19. Included in Geertz, *Local Knowledge*, 94–120, (cited in note 7, and referred to hereafter as *Knowledge*).
20. "Yoruba Artistic Criticism" in *The Traditional Artist in African Societies*, ed. Warren d'Azevedo (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973), 19–71. Hereafter cited as Thompson.
21. *Knowledge*, 98.
22. Thompson, 36, quoted in *Knowledge*, 98–99.
23. *Knowledge*, 99.
24. *Ibid.*
25. Thompson, 34.
26. *Ibid.*, 35.
27. *Ibid.*, 36.
28. Robert Farris Thompson, personal communication.
29. *Interpretation*, 128.
30. As reported in *The New Yorker*, "Talk of the Town," (April 23, 1984).
31. See particularly Sperber's essay "Apparently Irrational Beliefs" in *Rationality and Relativism*, editors Martin Hollis and Steven Lukes (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 1982), 149–180.
32. The relation between Victor Turner and the Ndembu informant Mushona is discussed by Sperber in *Rethinking Symbolism*, 19–20. The difficulty is also nicely illustrated by the reliance of Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff on a single, literate, and multilingual informant for his description of Tukano cosmology in *Amazonian Cosmos* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971).
33. James Clifford addresses this issue in "On Ethnographic Authority," *Representations* 1:2 (Spring 1983), reprinted in *Writing Culture*. See as well Sperber's essay "L'Interpretation en anthropologie," *L'Homme* XXI:1 (1981), 69–92, translated and reprinted in Sperber, *On Anthropological Knowledge* (Cambridge: Maison des Sciences de L'Homme and Cambridge University Press, 1985).
34. Sperber, "Apparently Irrational Beliefs," 165.
35. *Ibid.*, 152.
36. W. Percy, "The Symbolic Structure of Interpersonal Process," *Psychiatry* 24 (1961).
37. *Interpretation*, 121–122.

38. J. C. Crocker, "My Brother the Parrot" in *The Social Uses of Metaphor*, editors J. D. Sapir and J. C. Crocker (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1977), 192, as cited by Sperber, "Apparently Irrational Beliefs," 151–152. In fairness to Geertz I should point out first that he offered his construal without the benefit of Crocker's later investigation, and then that Crocker's essay elsewhere gives us reason to believe the Bororo entertain some peculiar notions, though apparently not with regard to themselves as parakeets.
39. See Bakhtin's essay "Discourse in the Novel," *The Dialogical Imagination*, trans. C. Emerson and M. Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981). See also the comments by Clifford in "On Ethnographic Authority."
40. *Interpretation*, 15.
41. *Ibid.*, 29.
42. See W. B. Gallic, *Philosophy and the Historical Understanding* (New York: Schocken Books, 1964), where the matter is taken up in the eight chapter. Wayne Booth offers a useful précis of essential contestability in "Preserving the Exemplar," *Critical Inquiry* 3:3 (Spring 1977), 407–423.
43. See *Knowledge*, 4, for Geertz's comments on "laws and causes" social science.
44. For an argument to this effect, see Stephen Toulmin, "Reasons and Causes" in R. Borger and F. Cioffi, editors, *Explanation in the Behavioural Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 1–26 and 42–48.
45. See the conclusion of Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979).
46. The story of this is told by Evans-Pritchard in *Theories of Primitive Religion* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), where we find the frustrated comment that "even on the facts available to [Victorian and Edwardian scholars] it is astounding that so much could have been written which appears to be contrary to common sense" (5).
47. I have in mind Lévi-Strauss's striking but patently bogus interpretation of Caduveo face painting in *Tristes Tropiques*.
48. Stephen Tyler, "Post-Modern Ethnography: from Document of the Occult to Occult Document" in *Writing Culture*, 125–126.
49. To avoid any possible misunderstanding, I should make it clear that by "naturalistic inquiry" I mean not inquiry into nature as opposed to culture, but rather inquiry that subscribes to the conventions of empirical disciplines.
50. Naturally, interpretive social scientists vary considerably in their orientations, ranging from hermeneutic circularists to empiricists. My comments in the text refer specifically to the position sketched vaguely by Geertz but worked up more formally by Charles Taylor in his essay "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man" (*Interpretive Social Science*, cited in note 8). Taylor's supra-empirical and yet putatively referential interpretive practice seems to me open to all sorts of mischief.
51. Through disenchantment, says Weber, "the world's processes lose their magical significance, and henceforth simply 'are' or 'happen' but no longer signify anything" (*Economy and Society*, editors G. Roth and C. Wittich [New York: Bedminster Press, 1968], 506).
52. Both the attraction and the difficulty of this are revealed in Thomas Nagel's classic essay "What is it like to be a bat?" in *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979).
53. *Knowledge*, 20.