

1

Are Cultures Readable? Reconsidering Some Questions of Method

Dietrich Harth

In der Phänomenologie handelt es sich immer um die Möglichkeit, d.h. den Sinn, nicht um Wahrheit und Falschheit.

LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN

To *read* the world as if it were a book written by a numinous Author is a venerable convention reaching far back to the days of cosmo-theological myths of creation. To *read* culture as if it were a text composed and written by society and its particular collective agents and to look analytically at the world of man-made symbolic orders is a rather new attitude.¹ There seems to be a need for permanently debating the key concepts involved in the business of analysing and reading cultures as texts, while the obvious attraction of this metaphor appears to be connected to those inter- and transcultural exchanges which in the long run seem to produce a very mobile and at the same time global texture of different cultural styles and patterns. The following pages, a modest contribution to the ongoing debate, do not pretend to offer some new rules or procedures of culture analysis. They just try to reflect from different angles some of the essential features of the above mentioned key concepts. Reflections, however, do not supply solutions and are not authorized to omit neither contradictions nor doubts.

¹ As to the world-as-book tradition cf. Blumenberg 1996. There are of course numerous publications pondering the methodological questions brought up by the culture-as-text model. I only mention the writings of Clifford Geertz, Crapanzano's critical commentaries and a collection of essays in German, edited by Neumann and Weigel (2000), which is an attempt to promote the interdisciplinary dialogue between literary research and interpretive anthropology.

So, reconsidering some questions of method is not like designing a systematic blueprint for the use of comprehensive theory-building. My aim is to show that notions like *text* and *context* belong to a set of interpretive categories, and that to favour *readability* as a criterion of cultural hermeneutics is more promising than to cling to the linguistic or structuralist notion of a formal textuality. And my argument is that cultural processes and their ascribed meaningfulness (*Sinn und Bedeutung*) should not be subsumed under the objectivity defined by nomological-functional theories, nor are they an unconditional prey of those who believe in the absurd. The sense and meaning of cultural processes, writing and reading included, do not cease to be objects for negotiations, what we very well know and agree with when experiencing actions and artefacts as appearances gleaming with a puzzling significance.

Legibility, Readability, Divination

My paper is an instance of the question raised in its title. This coincidence is neither accidental nor does it on first sight seem to be of great importance. The trivial fact is: I read a text, which had to be written down in order to give it under particular circumstances a voice with the expectation of being not only perceived but also understood. There is, by the way, a peculiar semantic link in English between 'understanding' and 'reading' which allows us to ask a person who is expected to have difficulties in understanding a verbal utterance or a non-verbal gesture 'Do you read me?' So when I read a text to an audience the activity on the audience's behalf is not only listening but it encompasses reading as well, the reading of a reading in the sense of interpreting an individual speech. In other words, language use gives us our first clue that cultures may be readable, because this assumption insinuates that the structure of cultural practice is analogous to the structure of language use.

But reading is more than mimicing a legible structure or misinterpreting an intentional utterance. It is, as Jean-Paul Sartre reminds us, not the poor reproduction of a 'given' meaning but an

*act of guided creation*²: the reader producing, during the process of tracking the composed texture of writing, his or her interpretation in the feeble shape of what could be called a 'virtual' text, while he or she is reflecting this experience in order to work it out in the manner of a well-articulated interpretation.

It is of some importance to mark at this point the difference between the concepts of *legibility* and *readability*. To make my paper legible meant to acquire and to practice at least a bit of the linguistic competence that an English native speaker has bred in the bone. Legibility, therefore, stands for the technical mastery of using, in speaking and writing, a specific language system provided a proper training in grammar, rhetoric, (logical) discourse and (literary) style. In a rather wide sense the concept includes those features of sign-practice that are the very objects of semiotics. Trivially all cultural phenomena are sign-produced and have to be considered, so to say, as *legible* structures by birth. That means all 'legible structures' have to be seen as textualized or – *sit venia verbo* – textualizable phenomena, whence we conclude that *legibility* is nothing else but a necessary formal component to the concept of text.

Yet, the notion of 'text' does not mean here the formal linkage of language signs or transphrastic elements. As a hermeneutic category the term rather defines the coherency of situationally embedded speech acts. The thus indicated communicative situation consists of two correlative patterns: the pattern of communication, and the pattern of action, determined by place and time, and in addition, by the intentions of the participants. The phenomenological description of an event like this cannot comprehend these components all at once. It has to differentiate analytically, in order to be able to ascribe to the event as a whole – for example a family celebration, a ritual initiation or the *mise en scène* of political power – sense and meaning.

If a culture is seen as a 'complex whole' (W. Griswold) the same holds true for a written text which through analytical reading will unfold step by step its specific parts: rhythmic, semiotic,

² Sartre 1948, 15.

compositional and semantic patterns or segments. There is a great deal of difficulty in using a similar method in analytically reading the 'complex whole' of a culture apart from the fact that culture, seen for instance as a performance, defies the formality of distinct demarcation lines. But this does not affect its legibility as long as we are aware that textualizing any cultural event or process is nothing else but a mode of perceiving the universe of cultures as a mobile connectionist network of dissonant signs. This sort of symbolism has a very old tradition and must not be misunderstood as the property of an academically inclined mind.

The notion of *divination* discloses the essential meaning of approaching the cultural universe with the attitude of someone reading a book. Legibility, as we have seen, is a necessary condition of this approach because it includes the key to the architecture and formal connectivity of that universe of rules and symbols which is behind each individual utterance. *Readability*, however, refers to that what theorists of interpretation call the 'sense' (*Sinn*) of that 'complex whole' considered here as a cultural universe. Sense is not the same as the meaning of a particular sign, be it lexical or occasional; it is, so to say, the general or possible 'meaning' ascribed to an utterance, a particular speech act, a communicative event the form of which can be described as a genre-specific configuration of textual patterns. To 'read' (interpret) the sense not only of a complex whole but also of an individual utterance, therefore, is a question not of a simple discovery procedure like decoding a secret writing but affords the above mentioned Sartrean creativity because of the incommensurability of all symbolically mediated actions. *Sinn*, phenomenologically explored, means – to quote Wittgenstein³ – potentiality, not necessity. Certainty here is futile. Guessings, conjectures, hypotheses are the only means by which we can actively approximate that sense of an utterance (verbal or non-verbal) to which we want to respond.⁴

³ Wittgenstein 1967, 63.

⁴ For a systematic discussion of the hermeneutical implications cf. Frank 1980, 13-34, and Kurz 1977.

Sometimes the interpretation of non-written signs, practised for instance in shamanistic rituals, is not in accord with our ordinary experience of reading and our will to freely constitute the sense of an action or text. In that case all is different, because the sign-‘reading’ of the shaman is carried out with the aim to understand and thereby to *subdue* the involved persons and recalcitrant material objects to a magically effective power. The comparison shows that reading in the sense of interpreting does not necessarily exert any power over its object, may it be a written text or a significant action. The modes and methods of reading/understanding therefore entail a reflexive distance between the reader (*interpretes*) and the object (*interpretandum*), be it a book or an action, a distance that also tells something about the difference between *understanding* (*Verstehen*) and *coming to an understanding* (*Verständigung*). To come to an understanding presupposes always at least an initial communication, which goes beyond one-sided information about the emotions, beliefs and desires of the other. The psychoanalyst or anthropologist who wants to understand the other person, therefore, first has to arrange a situation of dialogue by communicating with the ‘client’ or ‘native’ about the most prolific moments for both, the I and the ‘Other’. But it is in his most detached moments, in the calm and isolated situation of retrospectively contemplating his experiences, that the analyst tries to describe the confrontation, to deeply understand the sense and the meaning (*Sinn und Bedeutung*) of the collected data and stories, to argue with his colleagues common opinions and finally to compose his own written interpretations; a process which very well demonstrates the labyrinthine ways of approximating by method and divination the *sense* (*Sinn*) of a legible ‘complex whole’.

What I call ‘method and divination’ in this context cannot be defined in a formal way nor is it a unique or substantive procedure. It rather is an attitude of deliberate, but reliable explicitness encompassing criticisability insofar as it is essential to the justification of the interpretative findings.

Translation

I will leave this statement at this point, for the sake of further elaboration, without any comment, and return again to the dialectical interplay between the title and the content of my own writing. Obviously there is a muddle of languages behind my own writing and style of expression, my mode of thinking being moulded by German, my writing and its syntactic organization for heteronomous reasons being obliged to follow the rules and norms of a foreign language which I do not use in every day life and very seldom in academic communications.⁵ If – to freely paraphrase a famous sentence by Ludwig Wittgenstein – the boundaries of my language are the boundaries of my culture, I, while composing and writing an English essay, awkwardly sit on the threshold between two languages and definitely between two different systems of meaning. Whether this then means to sit between two different symbolic orders or in the middle of cultural difference I do not yet know. Anyway, ‘sitting on the threshold’ may sound a bit too shamanistic, but perhaps just this place outside commonplace attitudes may help to find a way into that cognitive state of affairs Todorov once called the ‘*exotopie, qui produit la connaissance nouvelle*’.⁶

There is a very common basic term used to describe the communicative negotiations (*Sprachspiele*) between two different languages and world views; I refer to the notion of *translation*. Translation means crossing borders. Yet, I do not want to confine this meaning to crossing the borders or boundaries between two or even more different languages. There is also translation, in the strict sense of the metaphor ‘trans-latio’, between different modes of thought, and between the social varieties of speech within one and the same linguistic community, and even between different states of power in the old-fashioned sense of ‘*translatio imperii*’. And, of course, in the case of a scholar reading aloud his own, linguistically

⁵ I, therefore, had to rely on the friendly help and critical comments of William Sax, to whom I want to say a most cordial thanks.

⁶ Todorov 1982, 14.

masked thoughts in front of an attentive but more or less anonymous and culturally mixed audience, I presume, a lot of translating has to be enacted. Not to mention the fact, that – as we know from Malinowski's shift from the 'context of words' to the 'context of situation' and finally to the 'context of culture' – translating is dependent upon more than one move of contextualization.⁷

So my not at all hazardous point is that translation in a broad sense can be regarded as a constitutive part of all communicative events, be it reading, listening, talking or bringing out the meaning of an action, a performance, an event, etc., by interpretation – especially when there is a need to give this interpretation the shape of a printed page or of a symbolic action.⁸ The concept of 'cultural translation', some decades ago introduced by British social anthropologists into academic discourse, may have paved the path for what in contemporary discourse is called 'textualisation of cultures'.⁹ When we look closely at the metaphorical meaning of the term itself, we can see that it refers to the dialectic process or mutual interaction which evolves in all speech acts: the Latin *translatio* has the meaning to carry something from one side to the other. And that is what for instance I myself have to do when I try to express my German-moulded thoughts and feelings through the medium of a foreign language. But that is, of course, also the very task of the ethnographer's work in the field, who carries all his cultural preconceptions into a world of habits and beliefs that are not his own, only to find out, when returning home, that his private habits have been, so to speak, translated by the experience outside and that he should be – as Nigel Barley put it – 'simply uncritically grateful to be a Westerner, living in a culture that seems suddenly very precious and vulnerable.'¹⁰ When working out this paper I

⁷ Malinowski 1935, 17ff.

⁸ It is obvious that the comparison of different translations of one and the same original text can show a great diversity of perceptions and discriminate interpretations. Cf. for instance the multifarious translations and stage-realizations of Shakespeare's dramatic writings in India, Sisir Kumar Das 2001.

⁹ Asad 1986.

¹⁰ Barley 1983, 190.

twice had a very similar dream: travelling in a place beyond my ordinary worldly experience – sure, there were some shapes of strange buildings and some more or less ghostly streets – I was very anxious to find a fixed point of orientation, some sort of an indicator that would tell me what kind of order the dream-world could offer to the intruder. And as far as I remembered when I woke up, one of the signs was a bunch of green apples which I considered to be a rather ambiguous indication: either a set of suggestions for getting closer to knowledge, or a reflection of myself in the attitude of a greenhorn – in any case, it certainly was the epiphany of a cultural and at the same time textual archetype if one recalls the story of the apple tree told in the Bible. And so the dream, understood as a context, unconsciously accompanying the pleasures of daytime thinking, gave proof to that ‘*Eigensinn*’ which is part of our second nature and cannot even be uprooted by the most sophisticated methods of self-criticism or self-denial in the course of strengthening one’s own empathy for the otherness of the other.

If we go a bit further we might conclude that translation is a way of mediating between identity and alterity. Translation is indeed a mode of transition and the only response to the need for intercultural communication.¹¹ If I want to spell out what is called cultural identity I would perhaps use all my wit to proselytize for an abundant heritage of German traditions. Changing from German to English, however, forces on me the attitude of a traveller, who, while he is marching in-between two languages, at each turn is afraid of being taken by surprise.

My suggestions about translation as a constitutive part of communicative interaction so far have been very general and it is time to remember that in English (I am told by my dictionary) there exists a common linguistic reference which under particular circumstances can be considered synonymous with ‘translation’, i.e. ‘interpretation’, the trade-mark of Interpretive Anthropology. The interpreter in both senses, as a translator of spoken and written language as well as an interpreter and analyst of social life and cultural symbols, without doubt is in the position of a go-between,

¹¹ Cf. Meschonnic 1999, 73.

he himself being the incarnation of trans-latio. The condition of the translator as well as of the interpreter is the condition of the 'marginal man', who stays on the verge of two different linguistic systems or cultural patterns. For this and other reasons, which I will discuss later, it seems reasonable to conceptualize interpreting and translating as two aspects of one and the same operation, the operation we are used to call culture analysis, the analyst being constantly in the state of the 'marginal man'. If this is true we already at this point can see a strong contiguity between the activities of interpreting, translating and reading, comprising what Clifford Geertz calls 'anthropological understanding'.¹²

The questions of reading and translation, of interpretation and understanding traditionally belong to the core of the discipline of philology where theories of interpretation and literary hermeneutics have found their most complete elaboration. But long ago the philological questions overthrew the narrow framework of the more traditionally carved out problems of genre evolution and historical grammar. Marginality, however, has survived and may be considered the prerequisite of that distancing attitude called reflection which intrinsically marks the operation called interpretation in philology as well as in ethnography, history or the social sciences.

Texts and translations are assumed rather as means and media of cultural production and transnational communication. The theory of translation, therefore, is not confined to linguistic operations but pays attention to political implications as well and has extended its scope to the general topics of cultural transfer including a keen awareness of the untranslatability of that which makes cultures reciprocally different.¹³ The staging of a written drama, the ritual dancing of an orally transmitted myth, the painting of a scene out of a holy scripture all translate, i.e. quote and interpret, particular aspects of the 'given' text, while obliterating by this very operation other specific aspects of the same phenomenon. And in each case the elements of the translated are changed, or better enhanced by

¹² Geertz 1977.

¹³ Spivak 1992.; Dingwaney 1995.

hitherto undiscovered meanings, because to translate does not mean to carry an unchangeable content from one code to another code but has to be understood as the opening of a debate about different views of one and the same topic.

This awkward proximity between translation and interpretation is observed with suspicion especially in the discourse of postcolonial criticism. To translate means here anyway more than a simple transfer from one language into another language. It seems as though Wittgenstein's identification of the boundaries of a language with the boundaries of a world belongs to the unquestioned assumptions of this approach. Because the suspicion aims at that type of appropriation through translation which, without hesitation, assimilates everything that cannot be understood to one's own linguistic and cultural habit and style. But, I think there is no sound reason to exaggerate this suspicion, as some do, seeing in translation a sort of cultural 'violence'.¹⁴

There is, of course, no simple rule to avoid adulteration. Translations call for criticism, because they obviously and necessarily work with various kinds of rhetorical dislocation and condensation and consequently produce 'another' text which never should be mistaken as the mere reproduction of the 'original' in the guise of another language. My point is, if the alien cultural practice *seen as a text* (a texture of actions and utterances) becomes the 'object' of cultural analysis, translation is a necessary strategy. And the conclusion I would finally like to draw from the above considerations culminates in the assertion that – to speak with Peirce and Eco – the phenomenon called 'text' (something mute and absent) has to be seen not as a petrified structure but as a 'dynamic object' the changing appearances of which unfold in a never ending series of translations, criticisms and interpretations.¹⁵

¹⁴ Cf. Dingwaney/Maier 1995, and Bachmann-Medick 1996.

¹⁵ Eco 1990, 335: 'L'Oggetto Testuale è sotto gli occhi del suo interprete, il testo stesso diventa l'Oggetto Dinamico [...]. Quando interpretiamo un testo parliamo di qualcosa che preesiste alla nostra interpretazione e i destinatari del nostro atto interpretativo dovrebbero concordare, in qualche misura, sul rapporto tra la nostra interpretazione e l'oggetto che l'ha determinata.'

It is true: this openness of the act of interpretation is often suspected of arbitrariness. The answer, however, could be that the process of reading protects the interpretation against an uncontrolled any-ness, if the reader takes the text at the same time as an object constructed by reading and as a yardstick (parameter) of his reading experience seriously. An adjustment, which is at the basis also of Sartre's idea of reading as an act of 'guided creation'. To sum up: reading in the sense of a creative process cannot be separated from the acts of translation and interpretation which the reader accomplishes while recognizing and at the same time transforming the textual patterns and their unexpected content. Reading is never a pure or linear apprehension of something given, nor is it the simple repetition of an intentional meaning. It rather is an imaginative and constructive process of building a virtual text with a new meaning by amalgamating two worlds: the world of the book and the world of the reader.¹⁶

Text and Context

All this affects the textualization of cultures and the different levels of anthropological or cross-cultural understanding, not to mention the outcome we are used to accepting as statements of proofed knowledge. But it is worthwhile to keep in mind that this should not be considered a weakness of ethnological and cultural understanding. To see it like that usually goes together with a well-known 'fallacy of misplaced concreteness'¹⁷ which suggests that – given the right tools for scientific observation – the semantics of social and cultural practices can be foreseen and decoded like the path of a mechanical tracker.

What was said above about the text also applies to the context, which is no less a text in the sense of an understandable phenomenon constituted by reading; in other words: an object *and* a

¹⁶ To quote from Alberto Manguel's *A History of Reading* (1996), reading is the 'apotheosis' of writing. For a more prosaic discussion of the creative construction of meaning in the practice of reading cf. Wittrock 1981.

¹⁷ Alfred Schütz 1973, 4.

condition of interpretation. Perhaps it is useful to discriminate, in a very broad sense, between the two types of *internal* and *external* context. The concept of the *internal context* might then refer to the relations between the (structural or semantic) elements constituting a dialogue, a narrative, a speech, a poem, an essay, etc., while the concept of the *external context* might aim at a diffuse potential of other texts that could be of use in widening the scope of understanding the focal text within a floating space of intertextual conditions, traditional symbols, linguistic systems, morphological frames, genre conventions and/or subjective preconceptions. And, of course, one could again distinguish two more subcategories: the external contexts the analyst makes use of, and the process of contextualization as a socially situated practice within the cultural segments the anthropologist has chosen as his objects of research.¹⁸

The prefix 'con-' marks the relational character of all contexts, and is a reminder not to forget the relationism which principally belongs to the text as such, e.g. its relations to a particular language, to an authorial agency and to the reader's and interpreter's imagination. In addition, the prefix 'con-' suggests that a qualitative difference has to be taken notice of here. The decision to regard as con-text what in a different situation would be seen as the focal text, often is a question of deliberation: what the interpreter calls 'context' usually will be selected out of a limitless variety of other 'texts' in order to explain the first specified 'text', or in other words, to give the focal text a meaning with the help of indications dug up on the site of the con-texts. Neither text nor context are 'given' phenomena, they are selected and validated by the interpreter. Their relation, which often appears to be self-evident is dependent not only upon the personal encyclopaedia of the reader but also upon the scope of his research interests and conceptual frames.¹⁹ And, we should not forget, the first context of research is research itself: 'the interpretation changes the text, the changed text

¹⁸ Hobart 1986.

¹⁹ 'Encyclopaedia' comprising the reader's world knowledge and professional competence: Eco 1990, 145-50 and 1992, 68.

calls forth a new interpretation, and so on and so forth.'²⁰ In terms of hermeneutics, therefore, the notion of context signifies nothing else but the interpreter's practice to 'create connections' and to develop a heightened sense for the inclusive and at the same time exclusive effects of his contextualizations.

But it is also clear that ... context is not 'given'. What is not given cannot be called upon or applied; it must first be created. Furthermore, there is nothing inherent in context that makes it a corrective for misunderstanding. A text 'reduced to writing' may give us the illusion of an inside and an outside, of a part and a whole, or of lower and higher levels of understanding. In reality, in acts that produce ethnographic knowledge, creations of context are of the same kind.²¹

One cannot escape context; not even the postmodern interpreter, because one of the contexts guiding his playful conjectures presents itself as a (deconstructionist) theory of decontextualized reading.²²

When using the terms 'text' and 'context' not as interpretive categories but as instruments useful to depict the interwoven structure of a verbal utterance, the analyst may construct something like a textual space. This multi-dimensional space is seen as consisting of words, sentences, paragraphs, intervals, chapters, books, genres, literatures, etc. And each of these units appears enclosed by the next higher and more complex one so that the complete textual space seems to be constructed like a hierarchy of infinite text-levels, not to mention the connections of these with the diachronic dimension of text-building and context-determination. This is, of course, a rather artificial construction which nevertheless may serve to make visible the essential context-dependence of all language-use, oral or written.

²⁰ Gruenwald 1995, 79.

²¹ Fabian, in Dillely 1999, 97-8.

²² There is no way out, as Taussig (1993, 237-8) hopes, but the critical reflection of one's own preconceptions.

Another meaning of 'context', however, emerges when the interwoven complex of speech and action is seen in connection with the extra-linguistic, i.e. with the so-called 'situational data'. Yet, when speaking of 'data' I certainly want to avoid the idea of objectively given bare facts. The 'data' the historian collects and uses in his retrospective constructions of a past situation are to a maximum degree written documents, the significance of his archaeological and pictorial findings more or less depending on these written contexts. And even the ethnographer who under particular circumstances acts as a 'participant observer' in the cultural practices of a foreign world collects his 'data' by singling them out of the spatio-temporal flow of events under the premise of a preconceived research opinion and corresponding theoretical bias. In short, as George Herbert Mead put it, 'data' are abstractions. To perceive an action as a so-and-so action affords on the observer's side a notion of what type of action could be discriminated from other types. So the constituents of what an action, an agent and agency are, have to be more refined than the action, the agent and the agency themselves. What's more, situational context-data belong to that sort of evidence which is attainable only through the selective and at the same time constructive approach of the observer to what he – seen from his subsequent endeavour of putting his interpretations into a readable form – has witnessed in the past present of the particular event under investigation.

In short, contexts must never be seen as determinants of interpretation. Of course, internal contexts guide the interpretative moves of the reader and give his assumptions about the latent sense of the chosen text the necessary support. To 'create' that sense, and in the end to objectify it, can only succeed when the interpreter/reader precedingly has used exactly the same text as a source of information. This information forms the contextual knowledge he needs to articulate that (un)intended and hidden sense of the text he is eager to (re)construct. Therefore, to see one and the same semantic system either as text or as context is a question of the interpreter's practice and is not dependant upon a queer set of features forming a chimerical thing in itself. I conclude: the concepts of text as well as of context – be it internal or external –

are *interpretive categories* and hence can only be elucidated in connection with those terms which belong to the theory of reading and understanding.²³

Text-building in Culture Analysis

The reflected interplay between text and context does not belong to the common sense experience of everyday life. But it has to do with the attitude of the interpreter constituting a world of *readable* signs and sign-linkages. And it is true, the criterion of readability is not an academic invention, it belongs to a heritage of divination that reaches back as far as the habit of tracking down the game's footprints.

When we seriously ask if there is a method or if there are methods in *reading* cultures, we have to admit that this does make sense only when we accept that there are analogies, if not affinities, between the fabric of writing and the fabric of socio-cultural phenomena beyond writing, and this is a question of text-building under the premise of theoretical and methodological decisions. Before I discuss the criterion of readability, which is at the heart of our problem, I would like to quote and subsequently comment upon a passage from Clifford Geertz's essay *Blurred Genres: The Refiguration of Social Thought*:

When we speak our utterances fly by as events like any other behaviour; unless what we say is inscribed in writing (or some other established recording process), it is as evanescent as what we do. If it is so inscribed, it of course passes, like Dorian Gray's youth, anyway; but at least its meaning – the said, not the saying – to a degree and for a while remains. This too is not different for action in general: its meaning can persist in a way its actuality cannot. The great virtue of the extension of the notion of text beyond things written on paper or carved into stone is that it trains attention on precisely this

²³ As to a relevant theory furthering the interpretive methods in the social sciences cf. Habermas I, 152-203.

phenomenon: on how the inscription of action is brought about, what its vehicles are and how they work, and on what the fixation of meaning from the flow of events – history from what happened, thought from thinking, culture from behaviour – implies for sociological interpretation. To see social institutions, social customs, social changes as in some sense ‘readable’ is to alter our whole sense of what such interpretation is and shift it toward modes of thought rather more familiar to the translator, the exegete, or the iconographer than to the test giver, the factor analyst, or the pollster.²⁴

The argument we find in this quotation can be considered one of the cornerstones of so-called Interpretive Anthropology: Interpreting social life ‘is like trying to read (in the sense of *construct a reading of*) a manuscript’, and culture can be seen as a process of ‘text-building’.²⁵ The notion of text offering the interpreter the opportunity of reading social life as a complex, but decipherable – to use Geertz’s wellknown metaphor – ‘web of significance’; to study cultures as a system of meaning is positioned against the earlier behaviourist, functionalist or formal structuralistic approaches. Interpretive or, as it is sometimes called, symbolic anthropology, therefore focuses

- on the production of meanings,
- on negotiations of meaning,
- on competing discourses,
- on hegemonic and counter-hegemonic developments, and
- on ritualized ways of embodying the semantics of social commitments.

This attention of the cultural analyst and interpreter on construing, negotiating and changing meaning in order to permanently reorganize the universe of discourse of specific groups or societies

²⁴ Geertz 1993, 31.

²⁵ Geertz 1973, 10, and 1993, 32.

gave a push to academic self-critique that I would like to subsume under the title of meta-ethnography. The 'meta' meaning, that all the features that are to be studied as constituents of the cultural world chosen as the particular object of research must, turning from the observed to the observer, be questioned on the side of the interpreter so that the meaning of *his* terms and concepts, the competitive attitude of *his* writing and the structural, narrative or stylistic organization of *his* discourse are equally important as the objectifying of the semantics of the target culture. The very notion of *hermeneutics* (theory of reading and understanding), often used to characterize the major methodical interest of Interpretive Anthropology, is quite in accord with this tendency to illuminate and eventually to control the presumptions, the academic pre-conditions and pre-understandings, which shape the methods, and at the same time guide the choice of perspectives in research. These presumptions are, by the way, not seldom the first and unrecognized contexts of research.

Nota bene: Hermeneutics must not be misunderstood as a set of tools fit to decipher a 'given' meaning. It rather indicates an *epistemology of understanding* – and at the same time of reading as well as of translation –, which does not focus on a *given* object of research and knowledge but reflects *how* knowledge and research find and define their objects. This stance implies what quite often in theoretical or methodological discourse is called a fallacy: the circularity of interpretative operations. When – to give two fitting examples – culture is studied in analogy to a literary text, this is done with the aim of representing the results again in the form of a corresponding text, the subject of which, however, has switched from the actor to the author (i.e. the literal meaning of *ethnography*); and to study cultural practices with the plan for a book in mind is nothing else but another confirmation of the perspectivism innate in all cognitive moves. Second example: When the ethnographer speaks of 'reading a culture', he presumes that his written conjectures about this very culture will eventually find resonance in a reading public. Here we touch the question, on what grounds the authority of the ethnographic author should be legitimized? Marcus and Cushman in their useful and informative

paper *Ethnographies as Texts* have discussed this topic.²⁶ Their proposal is to validate the authority of the ethnographer by thoroughly scrutinizing the following constructive tasks:

- establishing a narrative presence,
- envisioning a textual organization,
- pre-encoding the presentation of data, and
- anticipating the expectations of an imagined reader.

The fourth point, which is my own addition, in my eyes is of prominent importance because it makes use of the classic rhetorical device that the author has to reflect the potential expectations of the ideal reader, whom he wants to address.²⁷ There is, trivially, a big difference depending on whether one wants to convince – and striving to convince someone is a virtue of those who have dug up some relevant knowledge – a Western expert, a lay, or an indigenous reader. The other constructive tasks of text-building are not at all independent from that, as could be easily proven by showing to which measure the authority of a scholarly written text depends upon a set of communicative standards safeguarded by the academic institution.

But let us go back to the question as to what it may mean to ‘read’ a culture. Certainly, the idea of reading a ‘culture’ in its entirety is nonsense, especially since the term gives expression to a precarious and contingent process of creative practices and changing lifestyle attitudes. So ‘culture’ here must be reduced to some specific observable traits and traces, which the reader/interpreter considers representative of the social life of a group or community. I maintain that all cultural activities and phenomena are *readable* even if there is – as in ritual²⁸ – no certainty about an involved intentionality.

²⁶ Marcus and Cushman 1982, 39.

²⁷ About the ‘ideal reader’ as a constituent element of the narrative text cf. Eco 1979.

²⁸ ‘Clearly rituals are not really objects, but an object-like existence is given to them by the fact that they are ontologically constituted beyond individual intentions.’ Humphrey/Laidlaw 1994, 267.

Circularity in Interpretation

The circularity of the interpretative operation (*hermeneutischer Zirkel*) calls to mind that all methodically guided interpretations construe the totality, or better, the dissonant unity of their objects on the basis of those preconceptions extracted from the results of a most thorough analysis devoted to the details of exactly the same objects.²⁹ This makes evident that the phenomena we call 'objects' of research, even if they do share the characteristics of those things which are materially well definable, are to a maximum degree phenomena in the literal sense of the Greek '*phainesthai*', a verb which is at the root of the terms 'phenomenon', 'phenomenology' and 'fantasy'. In some cases there might be a keen interest of the interpreter in the imaginative and in the imprints of imagined lifeworlds (secular myths, utopian communities, etc.) on the social or cultural reality he has chosen as his research field (imagination being the Latin-rooted synonym of the Greek word '*phantasia*'), but there is always the need to make use of one's own imagination in order to produce a certain conjectural, i.e. interpretative hypothesis at all. Yet, the use of imagination during the course of creatively 'reading' a specific cultural practice as text must not inhibit that self-analytical reflection which gives the interpreter the right to consider his own approaches in anthropological understanding a rational choice. Imagination plays, as Max Weber has pointed out, a decisive part in the process of understanding the semantics of any human action, since – as I would like to repeat – understanding (reading) the other is a process of 'guided creation'. And in a very pointed form one could prolong this observation beyond the act of understanding to all actions taking part in building and transforming symbolic orders in general, including the ethnographer's 'work of

²⁹ Cf. Eco's description of the circle in Eco 1992, 64: 'Thus, more than a parameter to use in order to validate the interpretation, the text is an object that the interpretation builds up in the course of the circular effort of validating itself on the basis of what it makes up as its result.'

imagination', if we are ready to concede the truth of Pierre Bourdieu's sentence that 'all social functions are social fictions'.³⁰ It certainly is not enough to accept the circularity of the interpretative operation. To avoid uncontrolled misinterpretations which only lead to misunderstandings and erroneous conjectures one has to be aware of the dangers that lurk behind the unscrupulous application of determining classificatory schemes to the social and cultural units one has chosen to 'read' and study without asking why and for what reason. The 'Inclusivism' – to quote an example³¹ – seen by some interpreters as a basic and peculiar feature of the Indian mentality in fact is a historical response to that inclusivism of the colonial powers that could be seen from the point of view of the colonized as a violent form of exclusivism (from power, sovereignty, etc.).

The example shows that an overall acceptance, which could very well rely on Indian sources, can easily entangle the interpreter in an elusive circle. It furthermore shows that the definitions and classifications the researcher believes to be neutral analytical instruments form part of the same culture which he wants to explore with the help of these same instruments. So he is in danger of falling prey to a self-deception similar to that of the scholar of religion who mistakes the ideology of religious fanaticism as an expression of a genuine and deep-rooted belief. Another example we could discuss here at length is the rather odd, but politically popular idea of applying a holistic, but at the same time exclusive, notion of national culture to those transitional and culturally fragmented societies, which under postcolonial and/or postcommunistic conditions are in a state of transition and turmoil.

The term circularity reminds us of the hermeneutic circle, and circularity, seen from a general and perhaps rather abstract point of view, may indeed characterize the specific logic of methodical interpretation, because this logic proclaims that it is imperative to get as far as possible inside the world one endeavours to understand. This includes all the burdens one has to endure by learning the

³⁰ Bourdieu 1985, 76. Cf. also Greenblatt 1988, 17.

³¹ Cf. Vivekananda, 1989, 251f.; Gottlob 2000, 99.

foreign idioms of the text-worlds (even if they are written in our mother tongue) and, of course, of those unfamiliar languages which are the media of writing and interacting in alien cultures. If this learning process is not misapprehended as a means to only amend research strategies, it inevitably will change the categories and habitual patterns of thought the interpreter considers his property. That does not at all mean assimilation into otherness. It is sufficient to look at one's own property with the eyes of the other, a change of viewpoint or of perspective (*Blickwinkel*) the result of which could be the concession that the hitherto familiar-seeming terms of culture and its dominating concepts of interpretation are not central but peripheral and, therefore, open for negotiation. If this happens – I am speaking about the attitudes of the anthropologist – it will be possible to overcome the force of his or her academic upbringings and it will consequently be possible for him or for her to use the process of cultural translation in order to check and transform the outworn tracks of conceptualizing.³² To get away with the 'asymmetric ignorance' between researcher and the researched, it could then be useful to follow Dipesh Chakrabarty's proposal and imagine a world-history 'that does not yet exist', e.g. a history of Europe as one of the minor, i.e. provincial cultures.³³

One of the classical doctrines of interpretation reads: not to subdue the interpretandum to preconceptualized notions and terms but to be falsified by the stubbornness of the alien text-world. So, circularity in interpretation eventually turns out to be a special case of the circulation of meaning and at the same time gives proof of the idea that meaning in text can never be nailed down but is always open for permanent negotiation. While the version of scholar A is criticized by scholar B, the dialogical principle that according to Michail Bakhtin should regulate all historical and anthropological understanding emerges as a principle that promotes discussions between representatives of different versions of understanding.³⁴ This, in the eyes of many scholars, guarantees the openness of

³² Asad 1986.

³³ Chakrabarty 1992, 20; Gottlob 2000, 107f.

³⁴ Friedrich 1993.

interpretation and is at the same time a strong case against the illusion of a 'fixed meaning' (Geertz). And what is more, it calls into question the claim that the interpreter should be able to reconstruct in a full sense what he imagines to be the 'social logic' of a 'given' text.³⁵

The rupture between the written document and the world of cultural and social experience to which it belongs cannot be denied. A written text can never be considered the sheer exponent of a social or cultural system because it has its own *immanent logic*. And to read a cultural practice as text seems to plunge into a rather deep pit of illogic if the reader expects a logic the immanence of which belongs to his perception and not to the perceived. A reading, which uses the concept of text as a means to look at the interconnected phenomena of actions and utterances as if they were in the unswerving state of a functionally organized and rigidly structured system, squanders the possibility of understanding it as a ferment for sociocultural change. But *readability* as well as *textuality* are teaching something else. They refer not only to a processual structure of perception but also include all features of a dynamic system of changing meanings.

Circularity, for instance, is a component of textuality, because it is the enticement of the text as a world of potential meaning that draws the reader into that business of interpretation which, as the prefix 'inter' signals, happens as the circular communication between reader and text proceeds. The specific text or document does not 'fix' meaning, it is nothing else but a source of potential meaning, which the reader who acts in the role of an interpreter uses according to his or her own intentions. And if his or her intention it is to reconstruct the 'social logic' of that period to which the particular text refers, it is not a question of looking for some ominous structure 'behind' the text, because the concept of 'social logic' *in re* is a need for contextualizations that far exceed the limits of only one single text. The information one gathers by collecting and reading the other texts, which in the light of the text in focus are

³⁵ As claimed by Spiegel 19

to be considered con-texts, can help construct a *hypothetical* meaning. Contexts are discovered by the interpreter, they are not part of the field encountered.

Textualizing Cultures, and a Note on the History of Interpretation

Hypothetical meanings are not to be mistaken as the unshakeable expression of an objective state of affairs. They are constituted with the help of the interpreter's imagination and creative wit to collect and to combine a set of con-texts that fits into his or her project of anthropologically understanding the utterances and actions forming an essential part of the culture system. It is, of course, most important to be conscious of the difference between the interpretation of a text and the interpretation of a culture system. The text to be analysed may form part of the culture in question, yet this should warn the interpreter against taking it as a representation of the whole; despite the unfortunate habit of reading particular, especially the canonized texts metonymically as *pars pro toto*.

To 'read' a culture is not the same as reading a drama, a novel or a history book. It is a highly imaginative task, to a certain degree comparable to the scholastic programme of contemplating the Book of Nature in order to get in contact with the wisdom of the Unspeakable. There is an important truth in the attitude of paying respect to the Unspeakable even if it bears the name of an author, whose individual features could easily be identified. The 'text' of culture and the Book of Nature are neither reducible to the ideas and intentions of one well-known author, nor do they consist of a universe of alphabetical signs the comprehension of which does not afford any kind of exegesis including divination. And yet, the metaphors of 'Book' and 'text' suggest that both components – authorial intentions and some sort of sign-material – have to be taken for granted, because otherwise the rhetoric of 'reading' would make no sense.

Before discussing some more aspects of reading, translation and textuality let me continue with a short recollection of the nineteenth century history of hermeneutics and language

philosophy, to which we owe – notwithstanding all changes of paradigmata or perspectives which have happened since then – some of the most important insights into the fundamental principles of a methodically trained reading and understanding. The key concept of *text* emerges under the guise of figurative speech in Wilhelm von Humboldt's philosophy of language as well as in Wilhelm Dilthey's writings on the philosophy of science. Both use the term *texture* ('*Gewebe*'), which is in close relationship to Clifford Geertz' *web*, in order to circumscribe the complexity of cultural phenomena. Humboldt's metaphor *symbolic texture* ('*symbolisches Gewebe*') describes not only the system of language but also world history ('*Sprache und Weltgeschichte*').³⁶ And both discern the logical impossibility of analysing this web from outside: interpreter and historian are both entangled in the same web they want to disentangle. The differences of natural languages do not alter this situation since to investigate the world system embodied in another language or in the histories that have become strange again in any case presupposes understanding. But understanding is translation, i.e. the above mentioned crossing of boundaries between different languages, different modes of thinking, different ways of life and different cultural habits. So the difference between us and them has not to be seen as a divide never to be bridged. The common ground of mutual understanding Humboldt is searching in what he calls the 'work of mind' ('*Arbeit des Geistes*'), this being a paraphrase of all linguistic facts and of language in general.

Dilthey on the other hand is concentrating on an anthropological universal, i.e. the common psychological disposition of empathy which provides every human being the possibility of understanding each other. Neither Dilthey nor Humboldt has misinterpreted the methodically trained hermeneutic understanding as a means to level the differences between individuals, groups, societies and cultures. On the contrary, Humboldt's dialectic mode of thought induced him to mark 'difference' as a version of not-understanding which turns up in all communicative interactions. In his treatise *Ueber die*

³⁶ Humboldt 1963, 396 and 403. About Dilthey cf. Harth 1998, 58ff.

Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaues und ihren Einfluß auf die geistige Entwicklung des Menschengeschlechts (1830-1835) we read: 'Alles Verstehen ist ... immer zugleich ein Nicht-Verstehen, alle Uebereinstimmung in Gedanken und Gefühlen zugleich ein Auseinandergehen.' (... *all understanding is always at the same time a not-understanding, all concurrence in thought and feeling at the same time divergence.*)³⁷ With this argument Humboldt enforces what can be considered the first principle of the hermeneutic condition: the acceptance of an alterity, which can approximately be bridged but never be blotted out by interpretation. To ponder, theorize and philosophize about understanding (*Verstehen*) expresses the simple truth that understanding is neither given nor a matter of fact. On the contrary, the reason to strive for understanding is difference, i.e. the impossibility of complete accord.

The frequent use of the metaphor 'Gewebe' (*texture* or *web*) from Humboldt to Geertz indicates, so to speak, a systemic composure of the heterogeneous facts of socio-cultural life. Ominous ideological trends in the theory of culture and society often enough have claimed this composure to be of biological, ethnic or racial origin. The notion or image of 'web' is, as the quotation from Geertz has shown, an equivalent of text, if we keep the Latin original in mind. It is time now to find out why the interpreter of cultures prefers the text analogy to other possible and current comparisons or models like drama or game. I will try to prepare an answer by scrutinizing a small selection of text-theories and have for that reason consulted Jurij Lotman's structuralist position, Harald Weinrich's linguistic proposals, Umberto Eco's theory of semiosis and Paul Ricœur's important and influential philosophical reflections concerning the notion of text and the definition of textuality; the latter being a notion which comprises all traits that make a text a text. For the sake of brevity I will combine the major arguments without again mentioning the authors' names.

³⁷ Humboldt 1963, 439. Engl. transl. in Humboldt 1988, 63.

Text Models and Applications

The so-called *cultural turn* in ethnology and social sciences is a parting from positivistic and scientific thinking. Under positivistic signs the power of the interpreter, including the field worker as well as the historian, over its objects – the critics of this paradigm assure us – was left unquestioned. Even the structuralists, who had nevertheless developed a consciousness of the decisive power of concepts and methods over the analyst's mind, retained within their taxonomic fetishism something of an inheritance from objectivist model-building. On the other hand, questioning the nature and scope of structures promoted contacts between the theory of culture and language theory, and gave the semantic perspective an important breakthrough. The contexts of theory-building have changed: hard theories of the nomological type no longer prevail; soft theories of language research and literary hermeneutics have conquered the field and have given weight to those questions concerned with the use and effect of symbols in social and cultural practice.

The spreading of the metaphors of reading and (con)textualizing throughout cultural studies at first seems to lead in another direction. The decision of the anthropologist of culture, the sociologist or historian for the text model first of all limits the possibilities and the freedom of the interpreter. However, the interpreter is relatively free to adopt this course. One's choice to regard the world philosophically, historically, religiously or poetically, can be justified neither by induction nor by deduction. It is a choice between divergent paradigms, or – differently said – a selection from a multitude of possible viewpoints, which may elucidate different aspects of the world. So the question is, why look at a world of cultures as if these were spelled out like written texts? If there is nothing other than what the poststructuralists tell us, a world made up of a multitude and diversity of texts, then there is not much hope for a free choice between divergent paradigms.

Yet, many reasons could be found to defend the universalism of the text model. First of all, there is the simple fact that writing and reading are the elementary prerequisites for a reflected and

knowledge-oriented view of world and man. Second, there is the widely accepted conviction – pace Plato – that no medium is better suited to manufacture quantitative and qualitative orders of being than writing. Third, the text metaphor connected with the idea of organization points out that texts do not partition themselves mutually, but are all potentially linked, which reflects the widespread use of the context term. ‘Everything is interrelated’: this saying of the Indian storyteller, who prolongs the life of the tradition by orally distributing the traditionally handed down written mythologies,³⁸ matches the poststructuralist view that there is nothing beyond that semiotic connectivity which is at the heart of all textual operations and is therefore the basic principle of textuality itself. Fourth, and finally, a powerful and culturally widespread tradition suggests that all humans capable of reading and writing look at nature and the universe as a book written by a supreme being, not to speak of the evocative role of the book as a matrix of ‘reading’ the human condition.³⁹

Let us regard first the theoretical and methodical implications connected with the text model. To understand a religious celebration, a political ritual, or the play of the folk theatre as texts inevitably excludes the points of view of those persons who are involved as activists and/or participants. This is because the term ‘text’, like every other theoretically-founded descriptive term, does not belong to the ‘facts’ (*Tat-Sachen*) but rather to the perspective of the researcher, who regards and describes these circumstances. We could, therefore, say that at a very general methodical level, ‘text’ operates as a *heuristic* model. When applied, the model subordinates the specific cultural practice (celebration, ritual, play, etc.) to a formal structure which suspends the experienced performance of this practice by specific generalizations and abstractions. The structure of any written text conveying sense and meaning (*Sinn und Bedeutung*) has to be in accordance not only with orthography and grammatical rules (syntax and semantics) but

³⁸ Narayan 1994, 4.

³⁹ For example the special role of the self-book metaphor; cf. Jäger 2000.

also with certain conventions of formality (genre, composition), communication and publishing practices (para-texts).

Against this background, the term 'text-structure' appears as a summary of the collectively shared formal and semantic regularities and conventions belonging to the writing culture of a community. The 'social logic' of the texts, which the historical or ethnographical interpreter wishes to reconstruct, could therefore perhaps be considered a function of the structure of those texts produced within the boundaries of a particular group and its cultural habits, and not as an outward phenomenon.

But the restriction reads: As each written text is to be understood as a part of a whole writing culture which might be described historically and regionally, equally each cultural action (e.g. celebration, play or ritual) which the interpreter with the help of the text model would like to 'read', i.e. to understand, is one part of the religious, political, aesthetic, etc., culture maintained by the community, the communal culture as a whole being itself a complex whole of different cultural activities; hence arises the problem of selection and evaluation. In literary criticism, selection and evaluation have already occurred: the interpreter usually adheres to a given canon or sets up an anti-canon, before he himself opens the literary account in order to read and analyse. To set up, however, a canon of the cultural practices of a community does not make much sense. Each group, each social player has his own way of life and his own life-style. What is common to all is nothing other than the *imaginaire social*, a vague and permanently contested image of shared values, ideals, identities and symbols. If we want to understand this world of signs and beliefs with the help of the text model we once more have to ask in which sense the notion of text has to be transformed (translated) in order to fulfil the task of a useful optical instrument.

First, the trivial: the indispensable elements of all written texts are the characters and the rules governing the organization of the characters into words, sentences, paragraphs, chapters or similar formal patterns. The code – be it a lexical code, a code of grammar, of style or of genre – usually does not turn up in the text itself, and yet it seems a precondition for its legibility, namely, for

intentionally structuring and reading the text. By some theorists the code, which is nothing else but a synonym for our term 'legibility', is seen as a normative set of general rules not only guiding the organization of writing and composing but also as an instruction for properly reading the text; reading in this case used to designate an act of decoding (there are many ways of reading). In this respect the concept of code is neatly connected to the construction of meaning, be this the work of the author or that of the reader. But it lacks the creative aspects of that constitution of *Sinn* (sense) described above as an act of divination and interpretation. The meanings, however, of words, sentences, paragraphs, etc., *within* the text are not only dependent upon the specific codes coming from *outside*. All the existing elements of a particular text have their own specific meanings which are the result of a so-called context-determination. Therefore, on the level of text-semantics, we have to distinguish at least between two interconnected types of meaning:

1. CODE-MEANING – dependent on consciously or unconsciously realized rules of speech and writing which with respect to the legibility of the item affords lexical and grammatical competences.
2. TEXT-MEANING as a result of the determination of code-meaning by the surrounding context. To understand this meaning is not only a question of decoding, since it also affords what is called the hermeneutic competence to experience communication, because all texts – written or oral – can be considered communicative acts the intention of which gives the spoken or written text its effective individual shape. Hermeneutic competence is nothing other than the rational capability to produce and to read the procedural and ever changing textures of linguistically mediated interactions.

Before we decide to convey these interconnected types of meaning to the realm of sociocultural understanding we have to consider the particularities of the written text. The first duty of historical and, to a certain degree, of ethnohistorical research is to study the written

records and not the process of an action the interpreter attended himself as an eyewitness.

The concept of text in fact is a handicraft metaphor, it evokes the image of a weaver (textor) sitting at the loom producing a tissue or carpet by moving the shuttle to and fro. The metaphorical use of the concept is old and widespread. It keeps the allusion to creative doing, which does not alone satisfy a basic need because the patterns, which the weaver inserts into the fabric, do not support the material value or the user's pragmatic expectations of his commodity. So there is a surplus we should not forget when transferring the concept onto other than handicraft products. The transfer, to make a first point, makes sure that the object alluded to as a text has to be considered as something made, created, produced, or to put it another way, a materially perceivable thing that refers to a maker (*author*), to a set of rules for production (*poetics*) and to a person or group who is in want of the product (*consumer*). A written or spoken text may approximately fit this model, since there is an author, a set of codes and a recipient or addressee (individual or collective).

To repeat this in a more elaborate way: The indispensable features of a text are: (1) a stock of discriminate symbols (*sign system*), (2) a person uttering and composing the text (*author*), (3) a set of rules for text-building (*code*) and (4) a recipient sharing at least a part of the rules used for text-building (*reader*). The possible rules are not confined to a singular code-register. On the contrary, text-building normally makes use – even in one and the same genre – of a heterogeneous variety of different codes, since there are:

- genre (strategies of composition),
- rhetoric (strategies of persuasion),
- logic (strategies of argument),
- style (strategies of aesthetic amplification).

To apply this structure to a cultural system does not at all seem appropriate, especially since it is pretty obvious that text-weaving and its particular products are small particles in the whole mosaic of culture. If one considers culture a process of symbolic action carried

out by a group or society or any other collective unit it seems to lack intentionality. So it is without a well defined subject acclaimed to have the authority and authorial meaning of a written utterance, and it lacks, so to speak, the patterns which can be identified in the written text by applying the above mentioned methods for reading a code-guided action.

Of course, applying the text model as a methodical analogy to the 'reading' of a culture system does not afford complete congruency, and yet, the choice of the model should be backed by a rich consonance in order to provide reliable conditions for a promising outcome. To read cultures as semiotic systems of signs and symbols first was proposed by the School of Tartu (Lotman 1990). Practically all cultural and social phenomena – ritual, language, art, gestures and so forth – are semiotic, i.e. in our sense *readable* phenomena. But there was a limit as to what could be regarded as a text, since the cultural semiotics of the Tartu school kept to substantial features that would decide if a cultural unit is worth interpreting, the criterion of semantic content being the only criterion that would help to distinguish between a cultural text and a non-text. Textuality in this view is not restricted to formality, but depends upon the interpreter's competence to judge and, finally, leaves him the choice whether to put aside what he takes to be nothing else but a routine, or to make it the target of his analysis. To make textuality a question of semiotic competence is a concession to the arbitrariness of textualism and text theory. And, indeed, there are many different and contradictory theories, models and paradigms, but none of them can be induced on the basis of a sound empirical proof; even in linguistics the variety of concepts matches nothing else but a wide range of different theoretical designs open for permanent change.⁴⁰

Therefore, the following conclusion seems imperative: The language of the written text is mute until it comes into being through the act of reading. Each text as such is dead, mummified, virtual, or to quote once more W. v. Humboldt: Language 'hat nirgends, auch in der Schrift nicht, eine bleibende Stätte, ihr

⁴⁰ Cf. Gülich/Raible 1977.

gleichsam todter Theil muß immer im Denken aufs neue erzeugt werden' (438). When reading as an institutionalized craft has to be a *methodical operation*, the aim of which is to understand the meaning and to produce the sense of a particular text, it is right and proper to call it interpretation. But we must not forget that the result of this operation – the identity of a particular text – has always to be produced anew and is prey to constant discussion and re-evaluation, the identity being dependant upon the ever floating gap (difference) between the focalized and the ignored. Exactly this precarious dynamic and contingency nurture the text's virtual life, and so one could very well argue that the criterion of textuality is beyond a strict methodological stipulation.

From a point of view of precision we could argue that the characteristic feature of textuality is directly dependent upon the procedures of a trained formal analysis because the figurative criterion of weaving has its root in the rational criterion of connectivity. 'Connectivity' suggests that interwoven constellation of parts and whole, or, in other words, unity in variety (*Einheit in der Mannigfaltigkeit*) which automatically seems to accompany all our thinking about a complex universe of signs. At this point, according to my opinion, the analogy between written text and social action must be even more carefully examined:

1. Social actions manifest themselves in several media, texts in the only medium of linguistic signs and/or written characters.
2. The observation of social actions belongs to the very situation in which the action to be observed unfolds, while texts are read independently of the situation of their production.
3. Each written text has its own legibility which must not be misunderstood as a referential token of the surrounding world. Paul Ricœur's '*occultation du monde circonstanciel*'⁴¹ paraphrases very well the fact that a written text can be seen and experienced as an autonomous world (*une quasi-monde*).⁴²

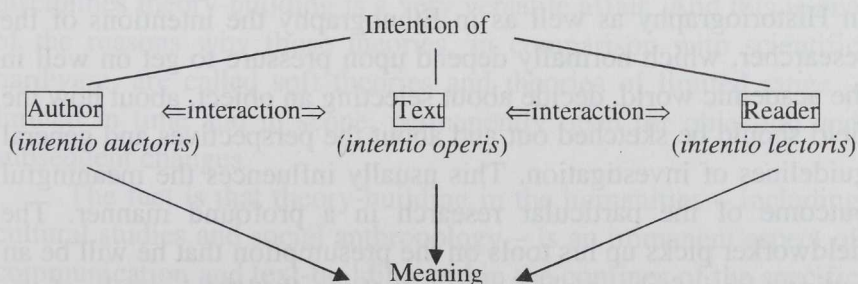
⁴¹ Ricœur 1970, 185.

⁴² Ibid.

4. A written text is, to a certain degree, its own interpreter since the textures of actions, images, arguments, speeches, etc. – the peculiar and individual properties of one and the same text – are the outcome of an internal energy the source of which can be traced by reading it, in a decontextualized context, as an expression of the *intentio operis*.
5. From this follows: To methodically interpret a text means to detect and at the same time constitute the internal meaning of the particular text universe and, therefore, has to be distinguished from using the text as an argument, as an index of the author's personal experiences or as a document of historical and/or social events.

The distinction, suggested above, between interpretation and use of a text makes it possible to draw a methodological line between contextual and intertextual readings on the one hand and versions of interpretation on the other hand. Interpretation has as its task investigating the meaning of the particular text-world, and is for that reason obliged to methodically open a path into the text-internal system of self-interpretation. Only when this is done it may be reasonable to use the reading thus achieved in order to employ the particular text as a link to those questions which are at the heart of contextualist and/or intertextualist interests.

The fact, however, that a written text usually is read independently of its first emergence does not exclude the quest for intentionality. Eco insists on three forms of intentionality, which might become effective in each text interpretation:



The arrows indicate that between the author, the text and the ideal reader, imagined by the author himself, there is an interrelation which in a radical sense differs from the communicative interrelations apparent in situations of social interaction.

But if one wants to transfer the model of intentionalist interpretation to the analysis and interpretation of social actions then some crucial modifications must be made: in place of the author's intention (*intentio auctoris*) are to be set the intentions of the actors (*intentiones actorum*), in place of the *intentio operis* the unconscious and unforeseen *intentiones actionis* and, finally, in place of the *intentio lectoris* the intentions of the observer and analyst. This transfer or translation of the model of text-interpretation into the field of cultural analysis might open the eyes for different types of intention effective in social action. And it could remind us that there is a gap between even the most thoroughly thought out intention and the concrete action, the actions often enough causing effects that were not intended, the reason being the heteronomy of the conditions of acting.

Once again we encounter an obvious incompatibility between the interpretations of texts and that of cultures with the help of the text model. The *intentio auctoris* in writing necessarily includes the hope to find and even to instruct a reading subject, while in social action the intention of the actors to count with the attention of a possible observer and interpreter has to be considered a disturbing fact for both sides.

Academic Constraints and Theory-building

In Historiography as well as in Ethnography the intentions of the researcher, which normally depend upon pressure to get on well in the academic world, decide about selecting an object, about how the field should be sketched out and about the perspectives and general guidelines of investigation. This usually influences the meaningful outcome of the particular research in a profound manner. The fieldworker picks up his tools on the presumption that he will be an author who is in control of a certain theoretical framework, of the collected data, of the faculty to convincingly represent what he

'read' in the field and, last but not least, control of himself as a member of a different (academic) culture. Reading social actions as textual configurations implies – as I have tried to point out above – theoretical interest not only in the general assumptions of socio-anthropological epistemology, but implies interest also in those questions that refer to the rhetoric, i.e. the representational text-building of anthropological knowledge. Accordingly the authority of the author has to be seen as a problematic source of evidence. And both attitudes are effective as intentional factors already in the earliest phase of organizing and preparing the course of fieldwork and/or of historical investigation. There is, of course, nothing wrong with that because the correlation between means and ends is a rational choice we are used to carrying out not only in scientific research but also in every day life.

One of the very old methodological questions in anthropology refers to the application of the terminologies, textualities included, developed in academic departments of Western cultures to cultures of non-Western origin. One often hears the claim that to use Western concepts in order to describe and interpret non-Western phenomena encourages a clash of cultures rather than facilitating mutual understanding. If this really were the case, all academic disciplines striving for better understanding – we call them humanities – would just be public nuisances. I believe that behind this argument lurks a politically, if not morally tainted fallacy. Controversies about the adequacy and justification of concepts and theoretical presumptions are nowhere as passionate as in the academic disciplines concerned with interpreting and comprehending linguistic and sociocultural phenomena. In these disciplines theory-building is a very versatile affair. And this is one of the reasons why those theories, in comparison with scientific hardware, are called soft theories and theories of limited range – limited in time and in scope, permanently open for objection and subsequent changes.

The fact is that theory-building in the humanities – including cultural studies and social anthropology – is an immanent aspect of communication and text-building within the confines of the specific discipline, that is, within the confines of a very particular cultural

segment, i.e. academia. They, therefore, must not be misunderstood as doctrinal and fixed in their meaning. On the contrary: these theories are, if they resist the temptation of dogmatic closure, ambiguous themselves, a quality they share with their objects which may facilitate the restructuring of the systematic preconditions during the course of research.⁴³ And what is more, those key concepts with metaphorical or figurative traits may inspire the creative imagination of the researcher to go further in the invention of new research conceptions and strategies than a tightly defined operational imperative would allow.

These rather abstract remarks should not obscure the dependence of cultural research and corresponding theory-building on cultural change in general or on the changes in ordinary language-use. Cultures perceived as readable become portable cultures and this mirrors the fact that cultures in our times – and today there is no culture which is not in touch with modernity – are losing their centres and show more and more the features of migrant and interlacing performative patterns.

⁴³ cf. Mommsen 1979.

References

- Asad, T. 1986. 'The Concept of Cultural Translation in British Social Anthropology', in Clifford and Marcus, 141-64.
- Bachmann-Medick, D. (ed.) 1996. *Übersetzung als Repräsentation fremder Kulturen*, Berlin.
- Bal, M. 1999. *The Practice of Cultural Analysis. Exposing Interdisciplinary Interpretation*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Barfield, T. (ed.) 1998. *The Dictionary of Anthropology*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Barley, N. 1983. *The Innocent Anthropologist: Notes from a Mud Hut*, London: Penguin.
- Berg, E. and M. Fuchs (eds.). 1993. *Kultur, Soziale Praxis, Text. Die Krise der Ethnographischen Repräsentation*, Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp.
- Blumenberg, H. 1996. *Die Lesbarkeit der Welt*, Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp.
- Chakrabarty, D. 1992. 'Post-Coloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for the Indian Pasts?', in *Representations* 37, 1-26.
- Clifford, J. and G.E. Marcus (eds.). 1986. *Writing Culture. The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Colebrook, C. 1997. *New Literary Histories: New Historicism and Contemporary Criticism*, Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press.

Crapanzano, V. 1992. *Hermes' Dilemma and Hamlet's Desire. On the Epistemology of Interpretation*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Das, S.K. 2001. *Indian Ode to the West Wind: Studies in Literary Encounters*, Delhi: Pencraft International.

Dilley, R. (ed.). 1999. *The Problem of Context*, New York and Oxford: Berghahn.

Dingwaney, A. 1995. 'Translating "Third World" Cultures', in A. Dingwaney and C. Maier (eds.), *Between Languages and Cultures: Translation and Cross-Cultural Texts*, Pittsburgh, London: University of Pittsburgh Press, 3-15.

Eco, U. 1979. *Lector in fibula*, Mailand: Bompiani.

Eco, U. 1990. *I limiti dell'interpretazione*, Mailand: Bompiani.

Eco, U. 1992. *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, ed. S. Collini, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Fabian, J. 1999. 'Ethnographic Misunderstanding and the Perils of Context', in Dilley, 84-104.

Frank, M. 1980. *Das Sagbare und das Unsagbare. Studien zur neuesten französischen Hermeneutik und Texttheorie*, Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp.

Frank, M. 1988. *Die Grenzen der Verständigung. Ein Geistergespräch zwischen Lyotard und Habermas*, Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp.

Friedrich, J. 1993. *Der Gehalt der Sprachform. Paradigmen von Bachtin bis Vygotskij*, Berlin.

Geertz, C. 1973. *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York: Basic Books.

Geertz, C. 1977. 'From the Native's Point of View: On the Nature of Anthropological Understanding', in J.L. Dolgin et al. (eds.), *Symbolic Anthropology. A Reader in the Study of Symbols and Meanings*, New York: Columbia University Press, 480-92.

Geertz, C. 1988. *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author*, Stanford: Stanford University.

Geertz, C. 1993. *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology*, London: Fontana.

Gottlob, M. 2000. 'Inklusionen und Exklusionen in der Begegnung zwischen Indien und Europa', in R. Klopfer and B. Dücker (eds.), *Kritik und Geschichte der Intoleranz*, Heidelberg: Synchron, 93-110.

Greenblatt, S. 1988. *Marvelous Possessions*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Grigely, J. 1995. *Textualterity: Art, Theory, and Textual Criticism*, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.

Griswold, W. 1994. *Cultures and Societies in a Changing World*, Thousands Oaks, CA.

Gruenwald, I. 1995. 'The Scripture-Effect: An Essay on the Sociology of the Interpretative-Reading of Texts' in J. Assmann and B. Gladigow (eds.), *Text und Kommentar (Archäologie der literarischen Kommunikation IV)*, München: Fink, 75-91.

Gülich, E. and W. Raible. 1977. *Linguistische Textmodelle: Grundlagen und Möglichkeiten*, München: Fink.

Habermas, J. 1981. *Theorie des Kommunikativen Handelns I: Handlungsrationalität und Gesellschaftliche Rationalisierung*, Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp.

Harth, D. 1998. *Das Gedächtnis der Kulturwissenschaften*, Dresden/München: Dresden University Press.

Hobart, M. 1986. 'Context, Meaning and Power' in M. Hobart and R.H. Taylor (eds.), *Context, Meaning and Power in Southeast Asia*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 7-19.

Humboldt, W. v. 1963. *Werke in Fünf Bänden*, ed. A. Flitner and K. Giel, Vol. III: *Schriften zur Sprachphilosophie*, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft.

Humboldt, W. v. 1988. *On Language: the Diversity of Human Language-structure and its Influence on the Mental Development of Mankind*, transl. by P. Heath, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Humphrey, C. and J. Laidlaw. 1994. *The Archetypal Actions of Ritual: A Theory of Ritual Illustrated by the Jain Rite of Worship*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Jager, E. 2000. *The Book of the Heart*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Kondylis, P. 1999. *Das Politische und der Mensch. Grundzüge der Sozialontologie I: Soziale Beziehung, Verstehen, Rationalität*, Berlin: Akademie Verlag.

Kurz, G. 1977. 'Hermeneutische Aspekte der Textlinguistik', in *Archiv für das Studium der Neueren Sprachen und Literaturen*, vol. 214, 262-80.

Lotman, J.M. 1972. *Die Struktur Literarischer Texte*, München: Fink.

Lotman, J.M. 1990. *Universe of Mind. A Semiotic Theory of Culture*, London/New York: Taurus.

Malinowski, B. 1935. *Coral Gardens and their Magic: a Study of the Methods of Tilling the Soil and of Agricultural Rites in the Trobriand Islands*, London: Allen and Unwin.

Manguel, A. 1996. *A History of Reading*, New York: Viking.

Marcus, G.E. and D. Cushman 1982. 'Ethnographies as Texts', *Annual Review of Anthropology* 11, 25-69.

Meschonnic, H. 1999. *Poétique du Traduire*, Lagrasse: Verdier.

Mommsen, W.J. 1979. 'Die Mehrdeutigkeit von Theorien in der Geschichtswissenschaft', in *Theorie und Erzählung in der Geschichte*, ed. J. Kocka and Th. Nipperdey, München: dtv, 334-70.

Narayan, R.K. 1994. *Gods, Demons and Others*, London: Minerva.

Neumann, G. and S. Weigel (eds.) 2000. *Lesbarkeit der Kultur. Literaturwissenschaft zwischen Kulturtechnik und Ethnographie*, München: Fink.

Plessner, H. 1985. *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. VII, Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp.

Probst, P. 1992. 'Die Macht der Schrift. Zum Ethnologischen Diskurs über eine Populäre Denkfigur', *Anthropos* 87, 167-82.

Rappaport, R.A. 1999. *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Reckwitz, A. 1999. 'Praxis – Autopoiesis – Text. Drei Versionen des *Cultural Turn* in der Sozialtheorie', in A. Reckwitz and H. Sievert (eds.), *Interpretation, Konstruktion, Kultur. Ein Paradigmenwechsel in den Sozialwissenschaften*, Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 19-49.

Ricœur, P. 1970. 'Qu'est-ce qu'un texte? Expliquer et comprendre', in *Hermeneutik und Dialektik II: Sprache und Logik. Theorie der Auslegung und Probleme der Einzelwissenschaften*, ed. R. Bubner, K. Cramer, R. Wiehl, Tübingen: Mohr, 181-200.

Sartre, J.-P. 1948. *Situations II*, Paris: Gallimard.

Smagorinsky, P. and C. O'Donnell-Allen 1998. 'Reading as Mediated and Mediating Action: Composing Meaning for Literature

through Multimedia Interpretive Texts', in *Reading Research Quarterly* 33, 198-226.

Spiegel, G. 1990. 'History, Historicism, and the Social Logic of the Text in the Middle Ages', in *Speculum* 65, 59-86.

Spivak, G.C. 1992. 'The Politics of Translation', in M. Barrett and A. Phillips (eds.), *Destabilizing Theory: Contemporary Feminist Debates*, Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 177-200.

Stierle, K. 1974. 'Zur Begriffsgeschichte von Kontext', in *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte* 18, 144-9.

Taussig, M. 1993. *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses*, New York/London: Routledge.

Todorov, T. 1982. 'Comprendre une culture: du dehors / du dedans', in *Extrême-Orient – Extrême-Occident* 1, 9-15.

Vivekananda, S. 1989. *The Complete Works*. Vol. III (Mayavati Memorial Edition), Calcutta.

Weinrich, H. 1976. *Sprache in Texten*, Stuttgart: Klett.

Witte, S. 1992. 'Context, Text, Intertext: Toward a Constructivist Semiotic of Writing', in *Written Communication* 9, 237-308.

Wittgenstein, L. 1967. *Schriften*, vol. 3, Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp.

Wittrock, M.C. 1981. 'Reading Comprehension', in *Neuropsychological and Cognitive Processes in Reading*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.