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Grasping Lived Cultures

If at the end of the twentieth century ... one were inventing a method of enquiry by which to grasp the complexity of social life, one might wish to invent something like the social anthropologist's ethnographic practice. (Strathern, 1999)

'What is Cultural Studies?' This is a question with which, as students and researchers within cultural studies, you will no doubt be familiar. It is one that is just as likely to be posed by curious friends and family as in the many weighty articles in books and journals that have attempted to provide answers. The very necessity of this question and the generation of lively debates and disagreements as to what constitutes Cultural Studies are indicative of some of the key characteristics which have shaped this book. These are the lack of clear-cut boundaries and disciplinary certainty that suggests a 'field of inquiry' rather than a fixed and stable discipline. As such, what can variously be described as 'cultural studies' will take on different contours and raise specific topics, issues and questions in different locations which, in turn, will be shaped by intellectual paradigms as well as national cultural contexts. Indeed, the debates and discussions that inform the different manifestations of cultural studies produce different emphases, foregrounding different aspects of culture. However, the many undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in cultural studies simply must, through selection and often simplification, produce one version of cultural studies for their curriculum. The point is that what might constitute this field of inquiry is open for discussion and tentative. What I consider to be important is to think about how we can make sense of the ways in which culture is produced in and through everyday living, what Raymond Williams called 'lived cultures', the focus of this book (Williams, 1981: 11). Meaghan Morris recently posed what, especially in relation to research methods, I think is a productive question. She asks, 'What does cultural studies *do*?' (my emphasis). Put this way, the question

demands a different kind of response, one which requires more practical and substantive examples in order to demonstrate the concerns of the field. To begin to answer her own question, Morris draws on Henri Lefebvre and his notion of the ‘critique of everyday life’ which she suggests is at the heart of cultural studies (Lefebvre, 1990): ‘an investigation of particular ways of using “culture”, of what is available as culture to people inhabiting particular social contexts, and of people’s ways of making culture’ (Morris, 1997: 43). This formulation provides some markers for identifying the concerns of cultural studies as a field of enquiry and it specifically points to that aspect which is central to this book: the cultures of everyday life. In addition, it insists on the materiality of culture. Here culture is not a free-floating set of ideas or beliefs, nor is it exemplified only by a canon of great works of art or literature. The meanings, processes and artefacts of culture are produced, distributed and consumed within particular material circumstances. In other words, texts and practices are both products of and constitutive of the social world. This is made up of a whole range of organisations, from, for example, institutions of the media and other cultural producers, the family, education and various agencies of civil society to everyday practices within specific social groups. Therefore, any attempt to understand culture and cultural processes must take account of this always complex set of material conditions. Questions of power and access are also contained in Morris’s formulation. Thus, to ask who has access to specific and legitimised forms of culture and who is excluded is to raise questions about the determinants and dynamics of inclusion and exclusion. There are powerful forces which shape cultural processes and products. Cultural Studies, however, acknowledges that people can and do engage actively in their uses of cultural artefacts in making sense of their own and others’ lives.

Thus, Morris’ formulation is already suggestive of the terrain of Cultural Studies concerns. Culture is understood as being actively produced through complex processes. It is broadly the production of meaning, or ‘signifying practice’ that happens at every level of the social and at every moment within cultural processes. This leads to questions about how and in what ways human beings make culture, why and to what end. How culture and the cultural shapes social relations and, more broadly, how culture takes its place in instigating or resisting social change. In order to begin to investigate these complex sets of relationships which are present in cultural processes we require a variety of methods ranging from textual analysis, observation, different ways of gathering knowledge and information from individuals and groups, such as diaries, different kinds of interviews and participant observation. Morris puts great emphasis on ‘lived experience’ in her formulation and this will be the focus of this book. However, ‘texts’ which includes written texts, e.g. literature, the press, but also visual, e.g. film, photography, advertising, aural, e.g. music, radio, and other kinds of symbolic artefacts, e.g. fashion, will clearly feature in our field of research. Thus it is important to identify some of the key issues in relation to texts and lived experience, and indeed,

the consumers of those texts.

In the late 1950s, Raymond Williams wrote tellingly of the highly selective nature of the literary canon, which works were included and which excluded, and called into question the way in which the academy approached the text (Williams, 1958). Alongside the canon of literary texts were methods of analysis that privileged the text and sought to identify the inherent meanings within the text. Building on Williams's insights, those working within the emerging field of cultural studies looked for methods of analysing texts which did not necessarily follow the existing approaches from, mainly, literary studies. Such scholars brought different kinds of questions to the text. They were not interested in finding the inherent meaning within the text but in the significance of different elements of the text in constructing what could be a multiplicity of meanings. In addition to this they were critical of evaluation which was implicit in the very selection of the texts for study. Of importance here was the work of structuralist Roland Barthes (1977) and that of the formalists, such as Propp (1968), which provided the necessary concepts for more 'scientific' modes of textual analysis. This was to look at how the text worked through different elements such as narrative structure; character function; cultural codification, etc. and what kind of 'reality' the text constructed. In addition, Roland Barthes' collection *Mythologies* (1972) expanded the very notion of 'the text' to such activities as a wrestling match, consumer goods such as cars and children's toys and the images and language of advertising, and exposing the ideological nature of the text. Barthes' work informed much of the early work on textual analysis, especially the analysis of advertisements, visual texts and popular fiction. It provided a way of departing from the evaluative study of texts and placing them within their social, cultural and political contexts. Barthes' work and that of his followers 'read' texts within a perceived cultural and ideological context, but it was not obvious how to figure out the relationship between the text and its social context and, in particular how readers interpreted the text. As Angela McRobbie (1992) observes, there is still a distinction within cultural studies between 'text and lived experience'. I now want to look at why this distinction might still maintain.

The social and the textual

The perceived division between the social and the textual can be seen more generally within the structures of the academy. Broadly speaking, it can be defined as the split between the social sciences and the humanities. It assumes different objects of study and has developed particular concepts and methods. The divide has created much friction within the emerging field of cultural studies, spanning both disciplines, and many have insisted that 'true' cultural studies must go beyond an analysis of the text itself. They argue that texts must be understood within particular material conditions. These are usually

identified in terms of a 'circuit' made up of the different stages of production, text and reader. The analysis of texts themselves, no matter how sophisticated the framework, nor how broadly a text might be defined, they argue, is of limited use in understanding the circulation of culture and the production of meaning. In other words, the text must be seen as both a product of particular social, cultural and historical conditions and as an agent in circulation. Richard Johnson, who succeeded Stuart Hall as director of the CCCS, presents a more subtle argument in suggesting that it is important to clarify how 'the textual' is understood. He cites scholars who have investigated bodies of literature for their broadly discursive practices in the engendering, for example, of imperialism (Said, 1978) and suggests that the re-evaluation of bodies of texts, or genres such as this are involved 'not so much in the literary text itself, but more in the "larger social text"' (Johnson, 1997: 465), that is the discourses of power which operated in constructing those texts, which becomes the object of study. In considering the status of 'the textual' in cultural studies it is useful to quote Stuart Hall: 'To me, cultural studies is impossible without retaining the moment of the symbolic; with the textual, language, subjectivity and representation forming the key matrix' (Hall, 1996: 403, quoted in Johnson, 1997: 464). Thus, for Johnson and Hall the textual is a crucial element in cultural studies, but as they suggest, it is the expanded notion of the textual which informs such research.

By way of example, let us consider a cultural form like the soap opera. Produced by television and some radio broadcasting organisations, structured through particular generic conventions, transmitted via television and radio and watched or listened to by large numbers of people. The text itself can be subject to analysis and in relation to national identity, race, class, gender and sexuality. But, is that where the soap opera text ends? What about the many auxiliary texts which accrue around a popular soap opera; the tabloid press, the gossip magazines, other television genres, for example, the chat show, books and the more ephemeral yet significant chat and gossip conducted between fans or casual followers of the serial? Everyday chat about television, and especially long-running serials, provides important social currency, and here we move into how the consumption of soap opera, and other popular forms, construct identity, a sense of self and relationship to others. This simple example should alert us to the dangers of marking dividing lines between the text and the social.

Thus, we can concur with Johnson when he questions the split between the social and the textual insisting that it is a 'phony' division. Furthermore, he insists that the social is textual and the division does not serve cultural studies' intent which is to tap into cultural structures and formations, through and via evoking responses to questions, discussions, conversations, as well as observations. But it is the case that the academic study of texts, cultural artefacts and the ways in which they are used and understood, have been marked out for particular study and for the purposes of analysis. For most of us, however, popular media forms, and other 'texts' are entwined in our

everyday lives, they provide a shared social and cultural currency and their images, catch-phrases and characters often settle into the sediment of popular memory. Furthermore, we draw on the rich resources of narrative, image, style which circulate within the symbolic worlds of media in thinking about ourselves, who we are and who we might become.

This emphasis on the ‘lived’ and the ‘social’ in the development of cultural studies in the late 1960s and 1970s, clearly required a range of methods which would enable the researchers to explore specific practices and contexts within which cultural texts and artefacts were produced and consumed. These developments will be addressed in Chapter 3, but for now I want to look at what existing methods were available to researchers in the 1970s who were attempting to ask new questions of new social phenomena such as youth sub-cultures, popular culture and the media. Two relevant disciplinary areas were sociology and anthropology. In this period, sociology itself had begun to move towards more qualitative and interpretive methods and the notion of ‘lived cultures’ proposed by Williams was suggestive of an anthropological approach. It will be useful to explore briefly some of the key distinctions between sociology, anthropology and cultural studies.

Sociology, anthropology and cultural studies: different questions, different methods

It is perhaps when looking at methods and methodologies that we can shed the most light on the differences between, and within disciplinary areas. Cultural studies has appropriated a range of methods from different disciplines, for example, textual analysis, historiography and historical analysis and psychoanalysis and drawn upon them as and when they are appropriate to its object of study. When specifically seeking to investigate the social practices of lived cultures it has drawn from methods developed within sociology and anthropology. Thus we can identify a range of methods that sociology labels ‘qualitative’ and which anthropology labels ‘ethnographic’. In adopting and sometimes adapting research methods more associated with other disciplines, projects carried out under the umbrella of cultural studies have been the subject of critique from both sociological and anthropological perspectives. At this stage a brief examination of the nature of the critiques can effectively reveal what is distinctive about the cultural studies approach to the cultures of everyday life and the necessary adaptation of existing methods. The criticisms inevitably point to absences and shortcomings and can be categorised as follows:

I Scale and breadth. The most common critique from sociology is that the studies focus on specific examples, they draw on a limited number of respondents and are therefore inadequate in representativeness and generalisability, two key criteria of validity in sociological research.

2 Depth and duration. The dominant critique from anthropology is that cultural studies research tends not to immerse itself in the cultural or social site or the worlds of their respondents. There is little attempt, they argue, to provide broad context over time of the subjects and their cultural practices.

According to the thrust of these critiques, research carried out in the name of cultural studies is neither sufficiently broad nor sufficiently ‘in-depth’ to satisfy certain established criteria. The assumption here is that cultural studies conceptualises the subject, the social world and even the cultural in ways which are commensurate with the sociological and anthropological approaches. The methods employed by cultural studies researchers have certainly been shaped and influenced by the demands of existing approaches and this book will explore how they engaged with and were critical of them. But for now, I want to over-simplify the implications of the sociological and anthropological critiques in order to make my point about the distinctiveness of the cultural studies approach.

Scale and breadth

It is important to think about what is produced through adopting different kinds of methods. Survey methods, drawing on large samples, can usefully reveal social patterns or overall trends. For example, through large data sets we can establish how many people go to football matches, or how many people watch *EastEnders*. Surveys could go further and identify which social classes go to football and watch *EastEnders*, and to some extent, the reasons they give for doing this. Thus a sociological project using these kinds of methods is preoccupied with the study of ‘population’ (Johnson, 1997). While it can ask an infinite range of critical and analytical questions about this phenomenon and develop theories, concepts and categories for understanding, via a whole range of methods, quantitative and qualitative, it will, in the main, be seeking to produce some representative and generalisable results which can shed light on the movements, formation, dimensions, changes in that broader population. It is the case that empirical studies using qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews, while eliciting deeper accounts from respondents, tend to be seen as adjuncts, or preliminary to the necessary larger-scale study. But what surveys cannot do is to explore the questions which are important for cultural studies, such as, the reasons for investments in such texts and/or practices, what meanings they have for people in their everyday lives, and the significance of how they account for this engagement. Furthermore, cultural studies would seek to explore how these practices might relate to identity, to a sense of self and to social relations, questions that a larger sample would not necessarily deliver.

Depth and duration

Anthropologists insist that work carried out by cultural studies in its ethnographic mode does not engage sufficiently with the subjects of their research. This requires us to think about the value, and indeed the practicalities of 'immersion' in the ways of life of our subjects. This assumption about 'proper ethnographies' is redolent of the by now much criticised intrepid anthropologist exploring a hitherto unknown 'field' and 'culture' in a specific place and time. But, quite apart from matters of intrusion involved in long-term 'observation' the kinds of contemporary cultures we are interested in are those which, to a greater or lesser extent, we inhabit ourselves. Thus, we are already to a certain extent, participant observers in our studies. But, more fundamentally, John Fiske (1996) suggests that the critics are somehow missing the aims of the researchers who are, he insists, primarily 'interested in meaning making'. I would concur, but go further and suggest that what cultural studies work attempts to do is to explore meaning in relation to the construction of social and cultural identity. These questions about the nature of the relationship between identity and subjectivity and lived cultures have primarily been carried out in relation to an understanding of the interpretation, consumption and use of 'texts'. Arguably, this requires periods of intense investigation into meaning production, rather than extended periods of observation. Extended time spent with groups as participant observers would not necessarily be any more productive than listening to people in close conversational interviews. In fact, extending the range of descriptive accounts might be the only possible achievement here. The production of rich descriptive accounts of social and cultural practices is valuable, but we must always ask what the epistemological value of this data might be. Perhaps the use of more innovative methods, employing conceptual and analytical frameworks, might be more effective for our investigations and more appropriate to the subjects of study

For cultural studies, the key questions are about meaning and the significance of the cultural at every level of the social and cultural processes. For these explorations we need flexible research methods. Marilyn Strathern, an anthropologist, argues that social scientists generally approach their subject of study with the 'deliberate selection through coupling specific methods with the expectation of specific types of data' and a strong argument for method which links to the theoretical perspective of the study. While this is an accepted and rigorous approach to method, it does present some problems for the kinds of questions and insights the researcher might be interested in, and particularly if we are concerned to 'tap into' cultural and social formations and processes through a range of different methods. The point here is that there are relevant elements to those formations that we cannot know at the outset. It is therefore extremely difficult to predict the kinds of routes and avenues through which our research might lead. We need some flexibility in our methods which will enable us to, in Strathern's (1999) terms, be 'dazzled'

and in Willis's (1980) terms, be 'surprised' by our research. This approach to method acknowledges the dynamic nature of cultural and social processes and of meaning production, and has the potential to respond to complex ways in which individuals, or agents, or subjects, inhabit their specific formations, identities and subjectivities. As the sociologists Glaser and Strauss, among others, have argued, the tendency of even the most open-ended qualitative methods within sociology is to freeze the different aspects of the subject of research in the deployment of rather rigid and fixed categories, if not in the data-gathering stage, then certainly, and more likely, at the point of analysis (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

While examples of cultural studies research have been found lacking when certain criteria are applied, there is no doubt that many of the small-scale explorations were interventions in fields such as youth studies, media and communication studies, and were suggestive of new directions which have shaped further developments, especially in relation to cultural power and the politics of class, gender and race. Examples of such studies will be critically assessed in more detail in Chapter 3 and throughout the rest of this book. It is clear that methodologically the study of 'lived cultures' within cultural studies are situated somewhere between a sociological approach and ethnographic approaches associated with anthropology. While this presents particular sets of issues at the level of method, I now want to discuss two problem areas which are pertinent to all such approaches, those of the politics and epistemology of empirical research.

Issue 1: Constructing the 'other' - surveillance and display

There is a rich seam of criticism that is concerned with looking at the role which ethnographic and sociological investigation has played in constructing that which it claims to describe. Ethnographic practice and research have a long and various history. They can be traced back to early travel writing, to anthropologists attempting to 'write down' cultures before they disappear and in order to establish the discipline of anthropology. This has been seen as an operation of power with the ethnographer fixing his or her gaze on different cultures and rendering them visible, through published work, for the gaze of his or her community of readers. In this process anthropologists tended to present groups as 'other' and 'exotic' emphasising the difference between 'them' (the primitive) and 'us' (the civilised). Edward Said, referred to earlier in this chapter, argues that anthropology is one of the many western practices (in addition to literature and art) in which the West fixes its 'imperial' eye on the oriental other and in so doing defines both the West and the non-West (Said: 1978). In addition to Said's fine work, a number of scholars have demonstrated the presence of discourses of colonialism in cultural artefacts, including travel writing, fiction, fine art and 'ethnic' collectors

and museum exhibitions. Michel de Certeau, speaking of the development of the discipline of anthropology, notes the gap between the anthropologist as docile and grateful for the hospitality of the host culture and the anthropologist as author of the written monograph. The latter reveals the institutional affiliations (scientific and social) and the profit (intellectual, professional, financial, etc.) for which this hospitality is objectively the means. Thus, he says, the Bororos of Brazil sink slowly into their collective death, and Lévi-Strauss, the world-famous anthropologist, takes his seat in the French Academy.

While these are examples of ethnography's past complicity in the exercise of colonial power, we can look in the West and identify similar mechanisms of power and particularly those of visibility and surveillance in the history of ethnographic and social investigation, especially in relation to urbanisation.

How the Other Half Lives is the title of a visual study of the poor of the newly urbanised New York carried out by Jacob Riis in 1890. The title and Riis's aims alert us to two of the most telling criticisms of ethnographic research practice. The 'other half' indicates a division in society between 'us' and 'them', those members of 'the other half' being people not like us. Second, the focus on the poor and disadvantaged who were produced as 'the other' and, some would argue, aestheticised as 'exotics' and constructed as such across a number of social and cultural texts. Although these paradigms have themselves been questioned and are more indicative of work done in early anthropology, sociology and documentary photography, these tendencies still linger. We can see their traces in, for example, the predominance of working-class or lower income groups which are the focus of much research within cultural studies. Andrew Tolson suggests: 'exotic cultural types [continue to be] discovered in the working-class communities of large industrial cities' (1990: 112). He has argued that these investigatory practices have a long history. He traces it through a number of important institutional sites developing and taking hold in the mid-nineteenth century. Tolson refers to Henry Mayhew, a journalist who began to publish his own survey of urban poverty and conditions of labour in the *London Morning Chronicle*, subsequently publishing his book *London Labour and the London Poor* in 1851, identifying what would appear to be a sub-culture, an urban sub-culture. Through the work of such 'social investigators' as Mayhew and Riis, it is possible to trace the visibility of sub-cultures, of the working class and the poor in the public domain to the formation of a particular sociological perspective in the mid-nineteenth century. Tolson calls this perspective the 'sociological gaze' which, while often a mechanism for social intervention of a reformist nature, nevertheless renders 'others' visible through various symbolic and textual constructions. This historical dimension to the formation of a potentially powerful 'gaze' should alert us to some of the poignant issues and problems that prevail in thinking about researching 'others'. Putting it bluntly, it is potentially exploitative in nature. As researchers we are in the business of winning the trust and confidence of our respondents whom we then encour-

age to speak openly to us about their lives, their routines, their feelings. This can include revelations of a most intimate nature and the telling of stories previously untold. We then attempt to represent the material gathered from our respondents usually within particular written forms that are intended for circulation within specific reading communities. Thus, the political and ethical considerations of what we do and how we do it should be foremost in our minds, and will be returned to throughout this book.

Issue 2: Access to truth - the dangers of empiricism

The ethnographic method can often seem deceptively simple. In part this is because it is rather similar to our common-sense and everyday approach to living in the social world. We operate by abiding by structures and routines, we make sense of the world through observation, picking up clues based on our social and cultural competence, through relating to others via conversation and discussion. This can result in a non-reflexive and naïve approach to the accounts people give of their lives, or the observations which researchers note down. Description is piled upon description with ranges of voices coming through the written text, standing there as evidence of the authentic experience or account of way of life. The ethnographer was there at that very moment, and the ethnographic text goes to great pains to persuade us of that.

However, this characteristic of ethnography can be useful. According to some of the early statements from the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), their interest in ‘ethnography’ was, in part, driven by what could be described as a weakness in the ethnographic enterprise, i.e. perhaps in its naïveté, its ‘strength against theoretical reductionism’ (Hall et al., 1980: 74). It is tempting for academics to work towards ever more sophisticated theoretical accounts of how the world is, but good empirical work can call into question some of these theoretical assumptions. However, as we shall see in Chapter 3, it is clear from this that the CCCS researchers during the 1960s and 1970s were addressing analytical and theoretical questions which went beyond an interest in providing descriptions or of documenting ‘experience’ for its own sake, or for its own guarantee’.

Theories of language were especially crucial in challenging ‘claims to the real’, to facts and to the ‘truth’. Far from a neutral means whereby people communicated with one another, theories of language emphasised the social and ideological function of language. Language, and how it is used, are arbitrary; it operates as a system, rather than being linked to the objects it describes, and its use relies on shared social and cultural convention. As such, it cannot be thought of as a neutral conduit through which descriptions, explanations, versions of the social world can be demonstrated. This post-structural turn in the social sciences and humanities has a strong legacy across different disciplinary fields and systems of thought. Thus, an acknowledgement of the constructed nature of knowledge through social processes has

had a profound effect on epistemological thinking and the whole notion of 'truth' or, put more accurately, claims to truth. A key term here is representation. Most obviously these insights have had an impact on the ways in which we understand visual representation. Photography is a particularly good example. The photograph has a long history of signifying 'truth', often being invested with the status of 'evidence' in areas such as the legal system, the press and broadcast media. More recent debates which relate to such notions indicate the constructed nature, even of those cultural documents which make the strongest claim to truth and direct access to the real world 'out there'. The documentary photograph is the product of selection, i.e. what gets into the frame and why. The developing process is far from neutral and is subject to a range of increasingly sophisticated manipulative techniques. And, of course, meanings are not self-evident, but depend on the context within which they are displayed or exhibited, for example, in a newspaper or on a gallery wall and what linguistic text accompanies them. All these elements play their part in anchoring meaning, which is far from fixed or predictable. This brief diversion into visual representation suggest that different 'truth' claims or of access to the 'real' have been put into question. The products of research can also be questioned as to what their claims to truth are and on what grounds they are making that claim. Perhaps at the centre of ethnographic practice is the recognition that, as Myrdal (1969) suggests: 'ethnography involves a series of experiments with truth' that can never be completed conclusively'. As researchers, we can never capture the 'whole truth' of any aspect of the social and cultural, rather we can, from our specific vantage point, produce a version of the truth, but one which we present modestly for others to consider.

Reflexivity, provisionality and modesty

The far-reaching critique of representation indicated above has also influenced anthropology. Marcus and Fischer (1986) note the emergence of interpretive anthropology which they use as a description which covers 'a diverse set of reflections upon both the practice of ethnography and the concept of culture'. The metaphor of culture as text established by Clifford Geertz (1973) opened the doors to debates about the moments of interpretation at all stages in the ethnographic project. These were followed by important work, notably by Clifford and Marcus, which examined the ethnographic text as construction. To return to the notion of 'vantage point' in ethnographic practice, this emphasises the centrality of the researcher to the research process and invites a far-reaching acknowledgement of that presence. It is this potential for reflexivity which makes ethnographic methods so useful for the exploration and investigation of cultural processes and the production of meaning. Reflexivity requires some explanation, but again it is useful to think it through in relation to our broader epistemological position. A reflexive approach is one that questions the theoretical and other assumptions of the

project. Furthermore, it actively interrogates its research categories (e.g. gender, class, ethnicity, etc.) in the light of the data being generated. Thus, by paying close attention to social actors, to cultural and social processes, some of the more extravagant claims of theoretical work can be questioned and investigated. A reflexive process, then, allows the project to grow and particular avenues to be pursued. It is open and genuinely exploratory. In a good ethnographic project the researcher can be said to be entering into a range of dialogues. First, those with the subjects of her or his research. Here the dialogues, through conversational interviews and less formal conversations present the possibility of open work and, as Willis famously described, 'the potential for surprise' (1980: 90). Second, the dialogue you can have with different theoretical perspectives or frameworks, through your research data. Third, of course, the dialogue you can have with your colleagues in discussing your work and, finally, the dialogues you can enter into when writing or presenting your work, usually in the form of written texts. At every stage in the process, then you have the possibility of reflecting on what you are doing, what kinds of knowledges are being produced, which concepts are too rigid and which frameworks hide more than they reveal. These are extremely important and useful epistemological questions which, if you are able to ask them of your own work, then you have achieved a flexible and reflexive approach to your study.

Imagine that you are an ethnographic researcher into music festivals. You live and work in the UK so have visited Glastonbury and spoken to, listened to, observed, photographed people involved in that event. Think then of 'scraps' of different kinds of data: a black and white photograph, a hand-bill, a voice telling you a story, an observer's account of an event, an analysis of a musical text or performance, a list of sponsors of the event, a description of the space, the noise, the smells, the atmosphere. As a researcher you would find yourself dealing with a great amount of such material, and there are no clear or hard and fast rules as to what you might do with the data. These fragments of data can be combined and juxtaposed in a variety of ways, they may be multiple reflections of one event and as such are changeable and fluid. Rather like a kaleidoscope, using our various data, we can produce complex patterns of frequently changing shapes and colours. This suggests that there is no one 'truth' or true story of the event, but many perspectives on the event. Thus our first epistemological observation is: that social and symbolic worlds are to be known not through some prescribed, fixed and 'logical' method (as proposed by the natural sciences, for example), but they are to be discovered by attending to many levels of practice through which meaning is generated, within particular social and cultural settings. Furthermore, what happens within these worlds is not predictable: we cannot know beforehand what we are going to discover. This is in marked contrast with the positivist approach to knowledge. Knowledge and ways of knowing the world are much less certain than the positivist model suggests and now even the natural sciences are acknowledging that we are playing some kind of trick (main-

ly on ourselves) when we believe in this kind of ‘science’.

There is still, however, a spectre of ‘the real’ and ‘the authentic’ hovering over ethnographies. Somehow, there is the suggestion that by listening to and describing what people do in particular contexts, we are getting nearer to the ‘truth’ than, say, through the analysis of texts or any form of document. Les Back’s very useful discussion on methodology in his *New Ethnicities and Urban Culture*, says:

[M]y intention here is not to present ethnography as the privileged arbiter of ‘what is really happening on the streets’, neither is it to characterise these new developments in cultural theory as removed or empirically uninformed ... [I]t means embracing a contingent and modest epistemology that attempts to achieve rigorous forms of reporting alongside a reflexive consciousness of the codes, textual moves and rhetoric integral to the process of writing ethnography. (1996: 5)

Here Back speaks of the limits of ethnographic, of the dangers in claiming too much on the basis of our access to the social worlds of ‘others’ and indicates the importance of reflecting on the written versions of our research.

In a similar vein, Purnima Mankekar, a cultural anthropologist, describes her work as that which ‘explores the potential of ethnography as an *evocative* genre of cultural analysis that aims to represent specific structures of feeling’ (1999: 49, original emphasis).

Notions of ‘evocation’ and the rather vague term ‘structures of feeling’ are more suggestive of works of imagination or fiction than of social research, but perhaps this approach is more appropriate for the kinds of phenomena which ethnographers are wanting to examine; human beings and the meanings they make of and invest in their daily lives.

I hope it is clear by now that the ethnographic approach, while presenting problems and difficulties, also raises exciting questions which are some of the most pressing in the current intellectual climate. Elspeth Probyn suggests that:

Given these [postmodern] intellectual conditions, it is hardly surprising that there has been, of late, a great deal of interest in ethnography’s ‘problems’ ... certain problematics seem to appear more pressing from its perspective, questions about the (im)possibility of representing others; the increasingly unstable construction of the white male as expert; the eclipse of science as a ruling metanarrative. In short, questions about where one can speak from, to whom one speaks, and why one speaks at all seem to be more immediately articulated within ethnography than elsewhere. (1993: 61)

These are questions about the politics of research and about how and in what ways we can represent other people in our research. Who are we as researchers, not only to grasp the right to intervene in other people’s lives, but to use their words and experiences, freely given, to form the basis of our

dissertations, theses and books? But hers are also epistemological questions about how we see ourselves as knowledge producers in relation to our chosen subjects of study and how we find a speaking position within that research.

It is arguably the case that the interests and concerns of certain branches of anthropology are converging with those of cultural studies, especially the notion of the constructed nature of the cultural. Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson suggest that the notion of the cultural as construct and something which is in process has severely challenged the anthropological assumption that 'culture' is somehow to be found in particular and specific settings, bounded within groups located and linked to space and place. These assumptions are now being challenged and researchers are pointing out that culture itself is part of a process and not a given and that it is not a fixed and observable entity to be found by immersion in a group or milieu. Questions of cultural identity and difference are being spatialised in new ways in the context of flows of global capital and migration, and can no longer be seen as fixed and located to a specific time and place. And, as Gupta and Ferguson point out, this acknowledges that 'all associations of place, people, and culture are social and historical creations to be explained, not given natural facts. This is as true for the classical style of "peoples and cultures" ethnography as it is for the perhaps more culturally chaotic present' (1997: 4). Clearly, the nature of the culturally chaotic present would include transnational flows of peoples, cultures and economies, global communications and sense-making practices, the complexity of which makes our challenge of 'grasping lived cultures' far more challenging than attention to an assumed fixed and bounded community of culture. However, Gupta and Ferguson insist that ethnography will still remain an important set of methods and that anthropology connects to the field of enquiry of cultural studies. Thus, the reading of texts, cultural products and public representations can complement the emphasis on daily routines and lived experience more associated with anthropology. What is exciting about these shifts is that they offer great potential for new combinations of theoretical and methodological approaches which can produce theoretically reflexive but strongly grounded empirical work which conceptualises culture and subjectivity as in process and flux. This is the kind of approach we need in cultural studies.

I have attempted in this chapter to introduce ethnography by relating it both to its usefulness for cultural studies and by outlining some of the main criticisms of its practice and politics as an intellectual project. This is to indicate the debate between the sociologically, textually and the ethnographically minded about the contested area of 'lived cultures'. My main point here is that implicit in its range of methods is its epistemology, that the world is to be discovered and that knowledge and 'truth' are always provisional and contingent. In the following chapter I will explore one of the key and important concepts within ethnography, cultural studies and especially in addressing lived cultures, that of 'experience'.