

# Chapter 1

## Rhetoric and Popular Culture

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Do you know what your blue jeans are doing to you? What kind of person do you turn into when you go to shopping malls? After a day of hard knocks at work or at school, do you try to use television to “fight back,” or to escape?

If you are like most people, you are probably not in the habit of asking yourself questions like these. We may think of our clothing, favorite kinds of music, or preferred forms of recreation as ways to express ourselves or to have fun. But we might think it a little far-fetched to believe that there is any serious meaning in *Late Night with David Letterman*, or that our personalities and values are involved in checking out this spring’s new swimsuits.

Although most of us realize that television ads or political commercials are designed to influence us, it may not be clear to us how the regular programming between the advertisements has the same function. A lot of us may feel that we wear our hair in certain styles for aesthetic reasons—because we like it that way. We may not often think that those styles also express certain positions in some important social and political battles. We may feel that we consistently shop at The Gap rather than at Woolworth’s only for reasons of taste; we might be surprised to hear that our choice has the potential to turn us into different kinds of people.

This book asks you to think about how everyday actions, objects, and experiences affect you and others. You are probably already familiar with some of the more serious and newsworthy consequences of music, television, or films, such as the association of heavy metal rock music with teenage suicide, or rap musicians who have been arrested on obscenity charges. This book will expand on things you may already be aware of, leading you to see how all of popular culture works to influence the public.

### The Rhetoric of Everyday Life

There are some well developed theories available for studying how such influence works. These are theories of rhetoric or persuasion. The word *rhetoric* has many meanings, and we will examine more of them in more detail in the next chapter. Many people understand rhetoric to mean the ways in which words influence

people. "That's just a lot of rhetoric," we say, and by that we mean that it's just so many empty but persuasive words. In this book, we will work from a different, expanded understanding of what rhetoric means: the ways in which signs influence people. (The term *signs* refers to the countless meaningful items, images, and so on that surround us; it will be explained more fully later in this chapter, beginning on page 6.)

In this book we will examine the rhetorical dimension of the everyday objects, actions, and events to which we are constantly exposed. We will also see what it means to refer to these everyday objects, actions, and events as *popular culture*. We will learn that many, even most, of the ways in which we are influenced through signs can be observed on this everyday, minute-by-minute level of popular culture. As we go through life experiencing and enjoying music, clothing, architecture, food, and so forth, we are also participating in rhetorical struggles over what kind of society we will live in and what sort of people we will be. This book will empower you to see those struggles as well, so that you will be able to find the rhetoric in rap music, the motivations in heavy metal, and the arguments in argyle socks.

To begin seeing everyday experience as alive with persuasive influences, let us begin by considering *power*. Power is the ability to control events and meanings. We are used to thinking that certain people, or groups, or classes of people have power and that others do not. We say that the Du Ponts, Kennedys, Rockefellers, and so forth all have power. Perhaps you have worked in offices or on committees with individuals whom you could clearly identify as powerful. Perhaps there have been other individuals who you thought were relatively lacking in power. Certainly, we might all agree that, compared with adults, children are relatively powerless for several reasons. But did you ever stop to wonder specifically when and where all this empowerment and disempowerment comes about?

Many people believe that, compared to men, women are relatively disempowered in most of Western society: Women earn lower salaries for the same jobs, fewer women have high-ranking jobs and positions of prestige, there are not as many female judges, physicians, police officers, college professors, and so forth. How does this relative empowerment of men and disempowerment of women occur? It is almost as if young males were all taken aside at a certain age and initiated into certain mysteries of dominance; it would seem as if all the men working at certain companies met in secret once a month to plan dastardly deeds of disempowerment against women. But it does not really happen during isolated moments of conspiracy. Instead, the relative disempowerment of women and empowerment of men at the workplace occurs from moment to moment during everyday experiences—in short, in popular culture. For example:

in fashion, where women often have available to them largely uncomfortable shoes and clothing designed to accentuate their bodies rather than to create ease of movement and repose;

around the water cooler, where the preferred topics of conversation among men are often things like sports or sexual innuendo (and when the boss is a male sports

nut, guess which sort of knowledge revealed in conversation is more empowering when it comes to impressing superiors);

And in social expectations, as when a male who leaves work early to pick up a sick child at school is considered responsible and sensitive, whereas a woman who does the same thing is often perceived as compromising her professional "commitment" to her career.

Of course, many women do not take these moments of disempowerment quietly. Women devise strategies of resistance, refusing the disempowerment that everyday experience often offers to them, and seeking alternative means of empowerment. Everyday actions, objects, and experiences are really battlefields, sites of struggle among political and social forces. We will talk more about that struggle later in this book.

Other kinds of social and political influence—empowerment and disempowerment—happen in the same way: from one moment to the next, in everyday experiences. A quick exercise will emphasize this point. Scan 7

### Exercise 1.1

This exercise is designed to help you see how some commonly held, even fundamental, notions are born and maintained in your everyday experiences. Pick, from among the following statements, the one that you *agree* with most strongly:

- American business is suffering from unfair foreign competition.
- In this country, urban problems are mainly racial problems.
- It is important to look nice and to smell nice.
- Pornography is a serious problem in the United States.
- People should keep their houses and yards neat and trim.
- Most politicians are dishonest, self-serving, or incompetent.

Now, do some thinking and reflecting on this question: Specifically when and where did you come to have that belief? Another way to ask this question would be, can you remember specific experiences that influenced you to hold that belief? To help you in your thinking, you might want to write down some specific experiences that fall under these categories:

- television commercials
- magazine or newspaper articles
- movies
- popular music
- television news
- television drama or comedy
- a radio program
- teachers
- talking with friends
- family discussions
- other

The statements above are widely held ideas; they are a sort of "party line" for most people living in the United States today. They seem to be "common sense"—statements that "grease the wheels" of everyday social interaction, allowing it to function smoothly. Perhaps not coincidentally, these statements are also what most people who are in positions of authority or established power would want the public to believe. That is because in general, these statements maintain present arrangements of power and privilege. If it is important to smell nice, then consumers will run out and buy lots of deodorant, perfumed soap, and so on, that will keep the manufacturers of such products wealthy and powerful.

It is equally important to understand that we do not always accept what established and powerful interests want us to believe. We don't always "go with the flow" with those beliefs that seem to be most common or easiest to hold. Which of the above statements do you disagree with? If you do disagree with any of them, do you do so with the distinct feeling that you are in a minority, or bucking the tide of public opinion, in doing so? If so, use the preceding list of commercials, articles, movies, and so forth to identify how you developed your ability to resist a popular idea or ideas. In other words, how did you learn to struggle against some widely held ideas?

There may be an opportunity for you to discuss with your class or with friends how you acquired the beliefs that you examined above. If you are like most people, you will realize that most of what you think did not come to you in one big moment of revelation. Instead, many of your ideas were acquired through the influence of lots of transitory, everyday experiences of the kind you listed in doing this exercise.

In this book, we will come to understand the complex network of those experiences as popular culture, and we will study ways to understand the rhetoric that is embodied in popular culture. To understand how culture influences us, we need to develop an understanding of what popular culture is—what it is made up of, and how we live in and through it.

## The Building Blocks of Culture: Signs

If we are going to think about the ways in which the things and events that we encounter in everyday experience influence us, then we need to start by thinking about how those things and events come to have meaning. That is because influence occurs through the management of meaning. If a bigot is persuaded to treat people of all races equally, it is because the meaning of racial difference is changed or that individual. If you are influenced to vote for Senator Smith, it is because the senator (his or her ideas, positions, and so on) has taken on a positive meaning for you. Commercials are rather explicit about the link between influence and meaning: We are urged to attach meanings of glamour and mystery to a certain perfume, for example, in hopes that we will be influenced to buy the perfume.

Let's consider the concept of a sign (here we will follow a very sensible theme proposed by the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce). Everything is a sign. That's because a sign is something that induces you to think about something other than itself—and everything has that potential.

Take the book you are holding. When you see it, you do not think only about

the book itself; you think about the class in which you are enrolled, about the ideas you have been reading, about the attractive person next to you in class, about how much the book cost, and so forth. Now lift your eyes from your book and look around you. For each thing you see, other thoughts associated with that thing will arise: The philodendron in that pot will remind you of the one in your family's home, the picture on the wall will lead you to think of the shopping trip on which you bought it, and so on.

Every sight and sound, every touch, smell, and taste you have, all prompt you to think about things other than, or in addition to, themselves. Therefore, everything is a sign of something else. We might also say that everything is a *signifier*, that everything *signifies* something else, or that everything has *signification*. And signification—or the other thing that is signified—is just another way of referring to *meaning*. If I say the word *professor*, and the thought of that learned individual who is teaching you pops into your head, then that thought is the meaning of the sign, "professor."

If you think about it, signification is a pretty strange fact: We hear words coming out of a friend's mouth and ideas (meanings) start jumping into our heads; we see a cap laying on a table and the sight makes us think of the soccer game we recently wore it to. How does it happen that we see and hear things, and ideas that are not the things themselves pop into our heads? Things act as signs in one or a combination of the three following ways:

Indexically (from the word *index*, referring to indexical meaning) *cause/association*  
 Iconically (from the word *icon*, referring to iconic meaning) *resemblance*  
 Symbolically (from the word *symbol*, referring to symbolic meaning) *convention*

### Indexical Meaning

First, some things get you to think about something else because the "thing" (sign) and the "something else" (meaning) are linked by way of cause or association. One thing is always or often found with another thing, and so one gets you to think of the other. This kind of meaning is *indexical*; we say that the sign is an index, or that it is functioning *indexically*. Smoke is an index of fire; if you see smoke, it causes you to think of fire because you know that one thing is associated with (caused by, in this case), the other. A thermometer is a sign with indexical meaning: A rise in the mercury in the column means a rise in the surrounding environment's temperature. Why? Because the one thing is always associated with the other; in this case, too, the association is causal.

Every character on the television show *Northern Exposure* is an index of every other character because the members of that tight little community are associated with (though in this case, *not* caused by) each other. Some characters are more strongly indexical of certain other characters, however: O'Connell will make you think of Fleischmann more than, say, of Ed, because through various episodes of the show, O'Connell has been associated with Fleischmann more often. The same set of indexical meanings is true of other shows with groups of closely connected characters, such as *Beverly Hills 90210*.

Everyone has played the word association game in which players are supposed to say which words come into their minds upon hearing a cue word. That game can be an interesting indication of indexical meanings. The word *cat* might prompt someone to think *dog*, for instance. Does that mean that the meaning of *cat* is a *dog*? In part—indexically—it does. That linkage reveals the fact that one part of the meaning of *cats* really is their association, as proverbial enemies, with *dogs*.

Many indexical meanings are widely shared: Is there a red-blooded American, for example, who will not think about basketball upon seeing a picture of Michael Jordan? Other indexical meanings are less widespread, being limited to particular groups of people, and some indexical meanings are even private. *Sand* may induce only veterans of the Persian Gulf War of 1991 to think of Iraq; to everyone else, *sand* may have the indexical meaning of a day at the beach. For your author, the smell of a cigar is an indexical sign of a grandfather who could sometimes be found with one, a more private meaning (an association) unlikely to be widely shared by others outside his particular family.

### Iconic Meaning

If a sign makes you think of something else because the sign *resembles that thing*, then the sign has *iconic* meaning. We would also say that the sign is an *icon*, or that it means *iconically*. The clearest example of an icon is a photograph. You look at the photograph and you think, "Aunt Griselda!" Why? Because the patterns of light and dark on the photographic paper resemble her. Some computer operating systems such as Macintosh or Windows use icons to signify the choices available to the user. Impressionists such as Billy Crystal or many of the actors on the television show *In Living Color* make their living producing icons: The combination of an inflection of the voice, a few gestures, and a stance or a way of walking, prompt the audience to think "H. Ross Perot" or "Bill Clinton," because those signs resemble the voice, gestures, and stances of the original people. Halloween is a great iconic holiday: little children, icons themselves, dress up to resemble Richard Nixon, Freddy Krueger, ghosts, and other horrors. Many words are signs with iconic meaning. Say the words *boom*, *bang*, and *tinkle* out loud. Part of the meaning of those words is that they resemble (by way of sound) the events to which they refer.

As with indexical meaning, signs may vary in terms of how widely their iconic meaning is shared. Your author once wore a set of nose-and-mustache glasses into class and asked the eighteen-year-old students what those glasses meant. "Halloween parties!" they all replied, giving an indexical meaning (nose glasses are found at, or associated with, Halloween parties). But this indexical meaning broke your author's heart. For him, nose glasses will forever mean Groucho Marx, because they resemble Groucho iconically. Evidently, however, the group of people who share that iconic meaning is dwindling as poor Groucho recedes into late-night television movieland. Iconic meanings can also be private; your picture of Aunt Griselda may cause only you to think of her if nobody else knows her. For others, the iconic meaning of the photo may be

something more general, such as "an elderly female," because that is what the photo resembles for them.

### Symbolic Meaning

Finally, signs can get you to think about something else purely because of *agreement or convention*, because people are in the habit of connecting a particular sign with a particular meaning. When that happens, a sign is a *symbol*, or has *symbolic* meaning, or is functioning *symbolically*. The clearest examples of symbols are words. Why does this mark:

book

mean the thing that you are holding? Only because everyone agrees that it does. People are simply in the habit of thinking of the kind of thing you are holding whenever they see that mark above, and they know that others have agreed to think the same thing. If everyone decided that this mark:

glorpus

would mean the thing you are holding, that would work just as well. Symbolic meaning comes about purely by way of what people agree to do. One way to refer to that agreement is to say that *symbolic meaning is conventional*, a product of certain *conventions*, or agreed-upon rules.

Symbolic meaning is in some ways the most difficult kind of meaning to learn, because it is not natural and because symbolic meanings vary from one group to another. Smoke naturally means fire. The photograph of your aunt naturally refers to her. There is a strong, clear, and necessary connection. Smoke also means fire in Japan, Germany, and Zimbabwe. And once you learn that indexical meaning, it does not change.

But anyone who has struggled through learning a foreign language knows that, as comedian Steve Martin said of the French, "It's like they have a different word for *everything!*" If you want to speak French, you must learn what certain signs mean for the French and assign the same meanings that they do to the words of their language. The rule for understanding symbolic meaning is to consult the group that is using the symbol to discover what the symbol means. For instance, in the inner city of Milwaukee, the expression "fall out" means to faint or to pass out. A suburban Milwaukee resident might not assign that meaning to those signs (words) unless that suburbanite checked with an inner-city resident to see what "fall out" means to him or her. The suburban dweller might assume these words refer to a long drop from a window. A nuclear strategist, on the other hand, might assume that they refer to the radioactive particles produced by a nuclear explosion. And a soldier might assume that they are an order to disperse.

Words are not the only thing with symbolic meaning. The particular pattern of red, white, and blue stars and stripes that you know as the flag of the United States *means* this country, symbolically, because the U.S. Congress has ordained it so, and people everywhere are agreed on this signification. In the U.S. Army, the figure of a golden eagle on the shoulder strap, epaulets, or collar of a uniform

means a full colonel, for no other reason than that everyone in the army agrees that this is what it will mean; a figure of the sun, or a tiny Washington monument, would do just as well if everyone agreed to it.

We noted above that smoke has the indexical meaning of fire, but it can also have symbolic meaning. In the past some Native Americans used patterned puffs of smoke to send messages long distances; the people watching the smoke from miles away knew from the pattern what meanings to assign to the smoke. When the Roman Catholic Church is in need of a new pope, the College of Cardinals will meet in closed session to cast their ballots. Those who wait outside the building for news of the election watch a certain chimney. The ballots are burned in such a way that if a new pontiff has been chosen, the smoke is white; if not, the smoke is black. In this way, too, smoke has been assigned symbolic meaning; the meaning of the colors could easily be reversed, or chemicals could be added to make some other colors, as long as everyone understood which color means which outcome.

Symbolic meaning differs from iconic or indexical meaning in that it can easily be altered. Nobody can decide that smoke does not mean fire (indexically). Nobody can decide that a picture of a horse does not cause you to think of a horse (iconically). With both indexical and iconic meaning, once you learn what a sign means, the meaning simply cannot change. You can discover iconic or indexical meaning, and you can forget it, but you cannot legislate it.

But symbolic meaning changes all the time. Thirty years ago, the word *gay* meant happy and carefree. Now it refers to a particular sexual orientation. Thirty years from now it may mean something entirely different. That is the nature of symbolic meaning: You can mess with it. You can change it. And for that reason, symbolic meaning is always slippery. This changeable quality of symbolic signs (principally language), has sometimes been described as the constant "slippage" of the signified (meaning) under the signifier (word). That is, the sign (for example, "gay") holds still while the meaning, or what it signifies, slips around (from happy and carefree to homosexual and perhaps beyond). What something means is never precise, because there is never complete and total agreement among everybody as to what symbols mean. We will see that this "slippage" of symbolic meaning creates great possibilities for influence in popular culture.

### Complexity of the Three Kinds of Meaning

We learned earlier that signs mean in one or more of these three ways: indexically, iconically, and symbolically. You may have noticed that we have already demonstrated how words can carry two kinds of meaning: All words are symbolic, and some words are indexical (as seen in the example of the word *smoke*). The point is worth stressing: Most signs do mean in more than one way; in fact, most signs have very rich meanings. Sometimes those meanings are widely shared, sometimes they are shared by a few groups, sometimes they are very personal. But it is a mistake to ask what one thing a sign means, or in which of the three ways it means, because signs are typically very complex in their meaning.

Pull out a dollar bill (if you have one after buying this book). This is a sign that means in all three ways. You will see some icons on it: some markings that resemble George Washington, other markings that look like a pyramid. You will

Meaning attached to potential for signification? Not to the effect it actually has?  
 If a picture has the potential for iconic meaning, but a particular person doesn't experience the signification, does the sign still have meaning? Is the meaning in the sign itself, or in the experience of sign?  
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 find indexical meaning: You might think of shopping, or of your wallet, or of your next payday, because all those things are associated with the dollar bill. You will certainly find symbolic meanings: The bald eagle clutching arrows and an olive branch in its talons means the United States by convention; moreover, the fact that this piece of paper is worth anything at all is purely conventional and by way of agreement. Congress could pass a law tomorrow saying that pocket handkerchiefs will be the unit of economic trade. If that were to happen and if everyone agreed to it, then you could blow your nose on dollar bills but you would slave away at your job for handkerchiefs. The fact that a dollar bill can be exchanged for a couple of candy bars or (at this writing) most of a gallon of gasoline is only a matter of agreement and, therefore, symbolic meaning.

### Exercise 1.2

Here is an exercise to help you appreciate how complicated are the meanings of signs. Review the signs listed below, and identify whether each has indexical, iconic, or symbolic meaning. Also, determine whether those meanings are shared widely, by smaller groups, or are relatively private for you or perhaps your family.

Sign	Indexical Meanings (How widely shared?)	Iconic Meanings (How widely shared?)	Symbolic Meanings (How widely shared?)
Pit bull terrier			
Rolex watch			
Skateboard			
Statue of Liberty			
Star of David			

Now, work through some examples that you or your classmates or teacher can suggest. Whenever possible, try to find at least one meaning per category.

Everything in your experience, every object, action, or event, is a sign. But that statement, although correct and important, is so broad that it does not go far enough to help us to understand how the things we experience in everyday life influence us. So we must go on to consider even more specific ways in which signs mean.

### The Building Blocks of Culture: Artifacts

In this book, we will not be equally concerned with all signs. Instead, we are going to focus on a subset of signs, known as *cultural artifacts*. An artifact is

1. an action, event, or object perceived as a unified whole,
2. having widely shared meanings, and
3. manifesting group identifications to us.

This definition of an artifact is meant to be rather wide; still, however, not everything is an artifact. Let's look more closely at that definition; it will take us a little while to go through it carefully and unpack its meaning.

### *An Action, Event, or Object Perceived as a Unified Whole*

You may have heard the word *artifact* associated with an actual object, something you could hold in your hand. An archaeologist who digs up a pot might claim to have found an artifact of Minoan culture, for instance. That idea of an artifact as something that represents a culture will become important when we discuss the third clause of the definition ("manifesting group identifications to us") later. But in this first clause of the definition, notice that by artifact, we mean not only a material object that is tangible, but also an event or action that is perceived as a unified whole; in this sense, events and actions, occurring in the material world, are also material. Air Jordan tennis shoes are artifacts and they are concrete, physical objects. But slam dunks, stealing first base, the latest popular dance, and the Fourth of July are also artifacts.

It is also important in that first clause to notice that the artifact must be some action, event, or object that is *perceived as a unified whole*. In other words, perceptions of a whole "thing" or "happening" that has some identity or character in itself make an artifact. The bottom stripe on the United States flag is not an artifact because, although you can perceive it all by itself if you make the effort, it is not usually seen as a thing in itself, with its own separate meaning. Neither is the field of stars in the flag's upper left-hand corner. Rather, the whole flag is perceived as a unity, and that makes the flag itself an artifact.

This first clause in the definition of an artifact is based upon an old, but still controversial, idea that the reality in which humans live and move is one that is fundamentally socially created. The idea here is that people live in a world of perceptions. For instance, the French have more words for different kinds of bread and pastries than do most Americans. Bread is more important to them, and they appreciate subtle differences in size and texture of loaves. That means that they perceive differences in bread that Americans might not ("It's all baguettes to me!"). That does not mean that we cannot learn to see all those distinctions ourselves (in fact, American tourists must learn to recognize more kinds of bread so that they can order lunch more accurately). On the other hand, people living in the United States today have many different words for vehicles: Fords, Chevys, 4 by 4s, Rangers, Aerostars, RVs, Voyagers, and on and on. People in a part of the world that does not have so many vehicles may not need to perceive so many different kinds, and so may think of all vehicles as being pretty much the same thing.

We see certain things and not others because of the social contexts that we grew up in; the people around us have called our attention to certain things but not others. People organize the world in ways that fit the physical and social environment they are in. That means that perceptions are adaptive mechanisms to help us adjust to the situations in which we live. If you live next door to a

snarling Doberman pinscher, your perception of the dog as dangerous is an adaptive mechanism that causes you to avoid the animal and thus live another day.

Furthermore, groups of people that live and work together try to adapt to their shared situations; thus, perceptions are also socially grounded. And so we grow up organizing the world, perceiving the world, in the ways that our social context encourages us to. For example, an important part of most Americans' situations is the need to recognize different kinds of vehicles. In addition, most Americans have the same, shared need to adapt to an environment in which vehicles are prominent. Football fans can see a bunch of people running around on a field and identify all kinds of things going on: an option play, the pass rush, and so forth. These fans have a recreational need to perceive lots of different plays, and they talk about the plays among themselves, encouraging each other to perceive the plays similarly. People who are not fans do not perceive the world of a football game in the same way because they do not need or want to; for them, a football game may look like just a bunch of people running around on a field.

### *. . . Having Widely Shared Meanings*

To become an artifact, a sign must be more than just a perceived, unified whole. The second clause of the definition tells us that an artifact is a sign that has become charged with widely shared meaning, just like a battery that has been charged with energy.

Take the expression, "Where's the beef?" That question has an ordinary, straightforward meaning. It asks where the beef is. But in the early 1980s, it was the theme of a popular series of commercials for a fast food restaurant. In the commercial, three elderly women were examining the burger of a competitor, and one of them, Clara Peller, kept forcefully demanding to know, "Where's the beef?" Walter Mondale, the Democratic presidential nominee in 1984, picked that up as a theme in his battle for the nomination against challenger Gary Hart, implying that Hart was all style and no substance. Pretty soon, everyone was repeating the phrase with delight and applying it to all sorts of circumstances, fueled by advertisements for both the fast food restaurant and Walter Mondale.

What happened was that three words, a simple English sentence, had become charged with widely shared, additional meanings. They meant something beyond the ordinary meaning derived from just combining those words. The phrase "Where's the beef" has a definite *symbolic* meaning, stemming from the conventions of the English language. But it picked up complicated indexical meanings when it became associated with a cute television commercial, an endearing granny, Walter Mondale, and Gary Hart. Eventually, the phrase picked up iconic meanings as well, as ordinary people and television comedians went about imitating Clara Peller's exasperated query.

In another example, Michael Jackson has always meant something to his friends and family, just as you do. But you are not a cultural artifact because you are not charged with the extra meanings that Jackson has picked up as a popular music star, tabloid fodder, and notable eccentric. So one necessary condition for

an ordinary sign's becoming an artifact is that it becomes charged with more meanings than it had before, and with more meanings that are widely shared.

Now, it is possible that the "Where's the beef?" example reads like ancient history to some of you. That's because this expression has by now lost its status as cultural artifact. The phrase had been out of fashion for a while by the time many of you were ready to quit watching Captain Kangaroo, and by now, nobody but scholars and trivia buffs remembers it. Of course, that three-word phrase still means something, symbolically; it asks where the beef is. But it does not have that unity as a whole and particular thing, nor the widely shared meanings, that once made it a cultural artifact.

The "Where's the beef?" example demonstrates that there is a *threshold* at which objects, events, or actions become artifacts. Furthermore, that threshold can be crossed in either direction; in other words, things, actions, and events are often in the process of either becoming, or declining as, cultural artifacts. Because perceptions change, the artifactual status of any sign must be changeable as well.

In contrast to beef, think about yellow ribbons. Before the 1970s, they had no special unity, no particular meaning in themselves beyond just being yellow ribbons. An early 1970s song by the group Tony Orlando and Dawn proposed the idea of tying a yellow ribbon around a tree to indicate to someone who has been long gone that they are still wanted back. Although the song was popular and catchy, the song itself was more of a perceptual unity, more of a cultural artifact, than was the idea of a yellow ribbon.

But when sixty-three Americans were taken hostage at the United States Embassy in Tehran, Iran, in 1979, yellow ribbons came to be used as a gesture of remembrance by the American public. They began to appear everywhere, with the specific meaning of (1) a demonstration of solidarity with those who were absent (the hostages), and (2) a desire to have them back. Since then, foreign political crises involving absent or missing Americans have repeatedly been accompanied by widespread, spontaneous sproutings of yellow ribbons around trees, lampposts, and traffic signs. They have crossed the threshold into the realm of cultural artifacts, and they are being maintained in that status by continuing social customs that encourage people to perceive them as artifacts—as things that have special meanings, as unified whole entities.

One consequence of becoming charged with widely shared meanings is that artifacts can be very complex; sometimes an artifact might even be composed of other artifacts. The Beatles were (in fact, still are) a cultural artifact as a group, but John Lennon, Paul McCartney, George Harrison, and Ringo Starr are cultural artifacts each in their own right (John Lennon, in fact, remains one even after his death). The same has been true of the New York Yankees during several periods of their history. The television show *Murphy Brown* is so popular that it is an artifact, but so are some of its more visible characters, such as the title character, who is played by actress Candice Bergen. Complex artifacts are charged with meaning, and if they comprise artifacts then those constituent artifacts are also charged with meaning. This creates some very elaborate webs of meaning, and thus of influence.

### ... *Manifesting Group Identifications to Us*

The third and final clause in the definition of a cultural artifact identifies all artifacts as *signs of group identifications*. We have noticed that the charged meanings of an artifact must be widely shared; let us turn now to a consideration of how the shared nature of an artifact's meanings relates to group identifications. Here we will learn that *artifacts are the material signs of abstract groups*.

Part of the meaning of an artifact is its connection with a group. All of us belong to many groups. Some of those groups are ethnic or racial: You might identify yourself as Italian-American, African-American, Polish-American, or Southern white, for example. Some of those groups are geographical: you are an American, a Kansan, a Brooklynite, a resident of your neighborhood. Some groups are social: You might be a member of the Vice Lords gang, of a bridge club, of a tennis team. Some groups are religious: You might be Catholic, Methodist, Rastafarian. Some groups are economic: You might be wealthy, middle class, working class. Males and females are two large group identifications. Identifications sometimes have emotional or aesthetic bases: Allegiances to particular sports teams or to clothing or product brands or designers are very often the grounding for group identifications, as with "Packer backers" or those who only buy Calvin Klein jeans.

All of us, in other words, have many different group identifications. But in fact, we very rarely see those groups in total. If you are a member of a local motorcycle club, you might very well see the whole group together at one time on occasion. But most of our other group or social "memberships" are much larger or more abstract.

Perhaps you think of yourself as a Quaker; but how, where, and when are you ever in touch with *The Quakers*? You see particular other Quakers, but never all of them, and never at once. Perhaps you think of yourself as an African American, and identify with other African Americans; but when and where does that identification occur? Another way to put this question would be, when does the "group" of African Americans touch you? When does it speak to you? How are you reminded of what to do, how to act, and what to believe, so as to identify with that group? Many of us identify ourselves as "American"—a very broad identification—but how does that identification occur? Are you being American as you sit here reading? If you stop for coffee? When does that group, "American," speak to you?

Large or abstract groups of people (and nearly all of the groups with which we identify are large and abstract) connect with us, and influence us, through cultural artifacts. There are objects, actions, and events that manifest those groups to us, that make the groups real, particular, and material. Artifacts represent groups to us, they show us what it is like to be part of or to identify with those groups, or they remind us of those groups and of what we are committed to by our identification with them. Artifacts are charged with meaning, but many of those meanings bespeak (that is, speak of or speak for) our identifications with groups. You need not be a member of a given group to understand an artifact that manifests that group identification, but it helps. That is to say, being a member of the group allows you

to appreciate more of the meanings, and to understand the ways in which the artifact is standing in for the group as a whole. In that way, a cultural artifact is a sort of an "in joke." Others may understand something of what it means, but it is really the people "in the know," those who identify with the group (or groups) for which the artifact speaks, who find the richest meanings in an artifact.

Artifacts span the continuum from those that are quite obviously associated with a specific group identification to those that do not so clearly bespeak a group. Often, you may see more clearly how an artifact manifests a group identification if you are not part of that group (although then, paradoxically, you probably will not fully understand the meanings that the artifact conveys).

For instance, think about the form that cable television takes in the United States: a widely available opportunity to choose among dozens and dozens of channels, many of them with very narrow, specific purposes. Now, this artifact is part of being in that very large and abstract group, "American." Because so many of the readers of this book are part of that group, because we so rarely step outside of it or confront in any meaningful way the people who do not identify with that group, the artifacts that bespeak "being American" to us may seem natural, universal, or even invisible. Those artifacts may simply seem the only way to be. We do not notice how they create a group for us. It may take going to another country, with different patterns of television broadcast and consumption, to see American cable TV as not universal but a particular way of doing things, as our "American" way of doing things, as our sort of entertainment in-joke. Seeing alternatives to such a distinctive cultural artifact helps us to realize that cable TV is peculiarly American.

Americans are defined in many ways, and we have many points of identification with being "American," but one of them is that we are the people with ready access to that kind of cable TV. What is useful about recognizing the ways in which cultural artifacts manifest groups to us is that we can then begin understanding the meanings of the artifact, and at that point we begin to understand our groups as well. To pursue the present example a bit further, think about what all those cable choices mean, especially in terms of what it means to be an American. We can tell from what cable TV means that being American has something to do with an abundance of choices. You might consider other distinctly American experiences that display the same embarrassment of riches (such as large restaurant menus or giant supermarkets)—the availability of more choices than anyone can possibly use.

Cable TV is one of those artifacts not obviously connected to a group, yet, as we have seen, it does manifest the group identification of being "American" to us. Consider a narrower example. I once went into a small town delicatessen in a Pennsylvania Dutch county and asked for a pound of the salami that was displayed in the case. The woman behind the counter was dressed (as were all the other clerks) in the traditional long dress and hooded bonnet that the Mennonite or Amish women wear in that part of the country. She looked at me with dark suspicion: "What are you calling *salami*?" she asked. It turns out that all hard sausage there is called "bologna." What I wanted was "Lebanon bologna" (made

near Lebanon, Pennsylvania). For this store clerk, "Lebanon bologna" is an artifact that is a material sign of her group identifications, but manifests that group so strongly and so often that she has ceased to think of that sausage as in any way special to her group. Lebanon bologna now seems natural and universal to her. Now, it's flatlanders like me who ask for artifacts that bespeak *our* group identifications, artifacts such as "salami."

Certain artifacts very clearly are the material signs of group identifications; they manifest specific groups to all sorts of other people. Take African-American hairstyles, for instance. As of 1993, certain styles are very popular among that group. Some involve designs shaved out of the hair on the scalp or cutting the hair into distinct shapes. And of course, elaborately braided hair, called cornrows, has been popular for some time. Plenty of people who are not black imitate such styles to an extent, but the artifacts of these hair styles are firmly and unchangeably African-American. They are styles grounded in the African heritage: African people have been using them for centuries. They are worn mainly by black people. They are even best suited physically to the characteristics of African hair.

Let's summarize what we have covered so far. We have seen that everything is a sign, but that not every sign is a cultural artifact. We have defined an artifact as

1. an action, event, or object perceived as a unified whole,
2. having widely shared meanings, and
3. manifesting group identifications to us.

In elaborating on this definition, we discovered some important characteristics of artifacts:

1. Artifacts are a socially created reality.
2. Signs become artifacts as they become charged with meaning, thus crossing a threshold into artifact status.
3. An artifact can be very complex, even being made up of other artifacts.
4. Artifacts are the material signs of group identifications.

Now, let's do an exercise designed to familiarize you with the concept of an artifact. Do this exercise on your own, or according to the directions of your instructor.

### Exercise 1.3

Identify yourself as a member of at least two broad social groups [for example, Hispanic and a union member, American Southerner and VFW (Veterans of Foreign Wars) member, male and United Methodist]. For each group, identify

- a. An artifact that "belongs" only to each of these two groups, that only members of the group are likely to see as charged with meanings. Identify some of those meanings. (Example: Only college professors are likely to know about and use the term *curriculum vitae*. Ask your instructor about it.)

b. An artifact that is closely identified with each group, but one that persons outside the group know about, use, and appreciate. Identify differences in what the artifact means for those inside the group and for the public at large. (Example: What does "Mexican food" mean, for members of that ethnic group as well as for the general public? Does what is considered "Mexican food" differ between Mexicans or Mexican-Americans and the public at large?)

## Definitions of Culture

In learning about signs and artifacts, we are studying the building blocks of culture. Now we need to turn to the term *culture* itself, to understand what that means. Throughout history, *culture* has been a central concept with a number of definitions. As the scholar Raymond Williams put it, "Culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language" (1976, 76).

### Elitist Meanings of Culture

Perhaps the most widely known definition of culture has an elitist flavor to it: Culture is the very best, the finest and most refined experiences, that a society or nation has to offer. This sense is found in the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of culture, as "the training, development, and refinement of mind, tastes, and manners; the condition of being thus trained and refined; the intellectual side of civilization." This definition of culture underlies Moe's recurring complaint to Larry and Curly on *The Three Stooges*: "Mind your manners! Ain't ya got no culture? What would Emily Post say?" This idea of culture is often referred to as *high culture*.

This first, elitist sense of culture sees relatively few artifacts as making up culture. Only those objects or events having meanings associated with the very best, with high intellectual, aesthetic, or spiritual achievement, would be considered cultural artifacts under this definition. By exposing ourselves to them, we "become cultured." Those who are not exposed to those artifacts are not cultured, in this view. Some familiar artifacts that would be subsumed under this sense of culture would include the ballet, the symphony orchestra, public television, music by Bach or Beethoven, paintings by Rembrandt and Van Gogh, sculpture by Michelangelo and Rodin. Some objects or events that would certainly not be considered cultural artifacts by this first definition would include heavy metal rock, polka bands, *Bowling for Dollars*, *Wrestlemania*, Billy Ray Cyrus, and corn dogs.

Often, those who talk about culture with this first definition in mind have what might be called an edifying impulse. In other words, they hope to improve people (which is not necessarily a bad thing) by exposing the public to the right artifacts. For these people, there is a sense that if you listen to Brahms rather than Pearl Jam, if you see Shakespeare plays rather than *America's Funniest Home Videos*, if you eat gourmet cuisine rather than *Ho-Ho's*, you will be a better person for it (and, by extension, our country will be a better place as well). This edifying impulse has been around for centuries, and can be found in nearly every instruction from parents or teachers to do certain things because they are good for

you. The edifying impulse is not necessarily limited to conservatives or those in power, either. It can also be found among certain Marxist scholars; for example, theorists such as Theodor Adorno and Herbert Marcuse (who were part of the so-called Frankfurt School around the middle of this century) thought that the pleasures to which the masses of ordinary people were addicted (things like television, pro football, or church bingo nights for us) were contributing to the oppression of those people (Adorno 1973; Modleski 1986, ix; Mukerji and Schudson 1986, 56).

On the other hand, there have been radical twists on this first definition of culture. Some people have argued that it is the radical or subversive elements of culture to which people should be exposed. This effort to "turn the Frankfurt School on its head" involves identifying experimental or alternative forms and experiences—such as guerilla theatre, alternative rock or folk music, performance theatre, and so forth—as the kinds of cultural artifacts that will liberate the common people so as "to achieve dignity and to make life full" (Buhle 1987, xx). The particular artifacts identified by this school of thought as desirable, as the right things to do or hear or see, are very different from those included in the concept of high culture. But the edifying impulse is the same. In both of these versions of what culture is, the focus is on a very limited set of artifacts, such as the objects and experiences of art, that deserve to be called culture. In its new *Supplement*, for instance, the *Oxford English Dictionary* updated its old definition of culture to emphasize "the civilization, customs, artistic achievements, etc. of a people especially at a certain stage of its development."

### Exercise 1.4

Consider the following questions for individual thought or group discussion.

1. If paintings, opera, poetry readings, and so forth are the products of high culture, what is everything else? Have you heard any particular terms (such as *low culture* or *mass culture*) used to refer to everything else?
2. What kind of power is created by calling certain things high culture? Who gets to wield that power?
3. Has anyone ever tried to "improve" you by referring to the idea of culture? Think about the specific ways in which that happened.

### Popular Meanings of Culture

There is a second meaning of culture that is also fairly widespread, although perhaps not as well known as the first. Raymond Williams explains that in this second meaning, " 'Culture' . . . was the growth and tending of crops and animals, and by extension the growth and tending of human faculties" (1977, 11). In other words, culture is that which sustains and nourishes those who live and move within it. We see one aspect of this meaning of culture in biological science: The *culture* within a Petri dish is what allows microorganisms to grow and multiply. It feeds them and supports them; it is by consuming the culture, by living in that culture, that the microorganisms grow.

What would this sense of culture mean for *people*? We must remember that people do not live by bread alone; unlike microorganisms, we require more than simply physical nourishment to support us. We need to be able to talk to people, to entertain and be entertained, to enjoy all kinds of diversions and distractions, to work at something we find meaningful, to meet together with other people. In short, for us culture is our "whole way of life" (Williams 1977, 17). Williams defines culture as "a very active world of everyday conversation and exchange. Jokes, idioms, characteristic forms not just of everyday dress but occasional dress, people consciously having a party, making a do, marking an occasion" (Heath and Skirrow 1986, 5). Does Williams's definition sound familiar? It should; he is really talking about the artifacts to which we are exposed.

We must be careful in how we understand the relationship between artifacts and culture, however. If you took a random collection of artifacts from all around the world and piled them in a building, you would not have a culture within the building. When Williams defines cultures as "whole ways of life," he is implying a kind of connectedness among artifacts, rather than simply a motley collection of many different artifacts. What turns a group of artifacts into a culture is that they are *systemically* related: They make up a *system of artifacts anchored in group identifications*.

Individuals identify with other people and see themselves as parts of groups, as we have already noted. Sometimes those groups are very small and completely present to the individual. More often, however, the groups are large and abstract, extending over wide geographical areas and broad reaches of time. *Culture is the integrated set or system of artifacts that is linked to a group*. The linkage between artifacts and a group occurs because the artifacts are how the group is manifested to its members. The artifacts are systematically linked to each other as they are linked to culture.

Culture is the system of material manifestations of our group identifications (remember that artifacts are actions and events as well as objects, and that what people do is just as material as are the objects that people can touch or see). Part of the culture of your local motorcycle club is the mangy mutt that is your mascot. Part of the culture of being Norwegian is eating *lefse* and *lutefisk*. But the club mascot is also part of a *system* of artifacts that includes your club insignia, the meeting place, certain eccentric characters who are members, the kind of motorcycles you have, your rituals and practices, and so forth. That system of artifacts, all of which are interrelated through their link to the group of the motorcycle club, is the club's culture. Similarly, *lutefisk* and *lefse* are part of a system of many other things that bespeak being Norwegian.

### Exercise 1.5

This exercise is designed to help clarify the idea of culture as a system of artifacts linked to group identifications. When you read the words *sauerbraten* or *Tannenbaum*, what comes to mind? Germany, of course. Not only that group identification, however, but other artifacts that make up the interrelated (and vast) system of German culture: schnitzel,

beer, lederhosen, Berlin, Munich, and so forth. To think further about culture as systems of artifacts, sort the following group of terms into what you consider the appropriate cultures:

grits	corned beef and cabbage	shillelagh	Robert E. Lee	Guinness stout
catfish	leprechauns	rebel yells	the IRA	the KKK
the Blarney Stone	stars and bars	peat moss	Spanish moss	antebellum mansions
	Catholics versus Protestants			

Most likely, you had no trouble discerning that certain artifacts in this list were part of the system of Irish culture, and the rest were part of the system of Southern (United States) culture.

*Popular culture* refers to those systems or artifacts that most people share and that most people know about. For those who identify with playing for a symphony orchestra, there is an interrelated system of artifacts made up of rehearsals, performances, instruments, and so forth. But that culture is not popular culture because most people neither identify with symphony orchestras nor know about their systems of artifacts. But television is an immensely rich world of popular culture, as nearly everyone watches television and, even if not everyone sees the same shows, they are likely to know in general about the shows that they do not see. In speaking of popular culture, then, we are concerned with things, like television, that are part of the everyday experience of most people.

We need to refine our exploration of *meaning* now to realize that few meanings are truly individual. Instead, meaning usually comes from a cultural context. What a given sign means, especially as an artifact, is determined in large part by the system of signs (the culture, the system of artifacts) in which it is placed. For instance, what a candle means is largely shaped by the system or cultural context in which you find it. It means one thing within the system of signs that make up a movie about a haunted house, where it might flicker and then go out in the night. It means something else within the cultural system of a given religion, as a votive candle or an altar candle, for instance. And it means something else within the system of a dinner for two people in courtship, as it casts a low, warm light over the proceedings. In sum, to understand what a sign means as an artifact, we must consider that sign within the context of the *system* of artifacts in which it appears.

### Characteristics of Cultures

The idea of a culture as an integrated system of artifacts needs further development and explanation. Let us explore three important characteristics of cultures:

1. Cultures are highly complex and overlapping.
2. Cultures entail consciousness, or ideologies.
3. Cultures are experienced through texts.

### ***Cultures Are Highly Complex and Overlapping***

When we say that cultures are highly complex, we mean two things. First, there are a great many things that go into making up the system of artifacts that is a culture. Remember that cultures can be very broad (American) or very small (this particular monastery), but even the small ones will be made up of quite a few interrelated artifacts: the food, clothing styles, ways of walking and sitting, architecture, forms of entertainment, sayings and expressions, moral and ethical norms, religious practices, and other artifacts that are the material manifestations of the group. So when we think about cultures, we are thinking about many different artifacts that are still related to each other through being part of a system.

There is a second, more interesting way of thinking about the complexity and overlapping nature of cultures. Ordinary language usage sometimes causes us to think that we belong to only one culture. But that is not the case; we identify with many different groups through the many different cultures that nurture and support us. We can approach this second point by returning to Williams's definition of a culture as "a whole way of life." This definition is actually problematic; there really isn't a single, whole way of life for most of us today. To understand why, let's take a brief detour through history.

It probably used to be the case, many centuries ago, that any given person lived within one large, overarching culture. Such a culture may have been complex, but it was not multiple. If you had lived in Britain during the Dark Ages, for instance (say around 900 C.E.), everything around you, everything you encountered during the day, probably everything you even knew about, was part of the same system, the same group identification, and thus the same culture. You saw and spoke only to others of your own group. Different aspects of life, such as work, religion, or government, were all closely interrelated; they all manifested the same overarching culture to you. This kind of social situation may still be found in some tribal cultures around the world, where people are primarily enveloped in a small, single group of people and surrounded by the artifacts that represent that single group. Perhaps the clearest modern version of this kind of immersion in a culture would be a cloistered monastery or convent, in which the members encounter, almost exclusively, the experiences having to do with just their own, single culture.

But clearly, few of us live in such an extremely monocultural situation today. Communication and transportation have become much easier and more common, especially over long distances. We are therefore exposed to a bewildering variety of messages and signs, often originating materially in other cultures. People of many different backgrounds live with or near each other. We may now belong to a number of groups, rather than one large, overarching group that surrounds us. For instance, you can become deeply involved with computer networks, electronic "bulletin boards" that are spread out all across the country or even the world. Such a group need not have anything to do with the company you work for,

which may have very little connection with where you go for recreation, which may have little to do with your ethnic or cultural identification, and so forth. In short, because there are many different groups with which you identify, you belong simultaneously to many different cultures. Because of this abundance of group identifications, many people today feel that their lives are fragmented. Some social observers have called this fragmentation the *postmodern condition*.

To return to Williams's definition, for nearly all of us in today's postmodern world, there simply are not any "whole ways of life" in which we immerse ourselves exclusively. We stand within a complex structure of ways of life, identifying with many different groups that may have very little in common with each other. This is especially likely to be true for people who travel a great deal, who associate with many different kinds of people, and who hold a variety of jobs. A person who lives in the same largely Hispanic neighborhood, attends a local, largely Hispanic Roman Catholic church, works in a local bodega, and hangs out at the nearby community center, is much closer to living within a single, overarching culture than is the person who moves out of that neighborhood, works downtown, watches French and German films, eats in Thai and African restaurants, and becomes a Buddhist. It would be a mistake to say that everyone today is one way or another; but increasing numbers of people are likely to be like the second person in this example. At any rate, the more you are like that second person—the more you move around, the more you vary your experience and your environment—the more different cultures you will find identifications with. That variety is, increasingly, the condition of most people's lives today.

It is also important to understand that our identifications with different cultures is one important source of *contradictions* in terms of what artifacts mean. For instance, if your business requires you to go into work on Sunday while your religion requires you to attend Mass, you will be torn in two directions. What it means to skip Mass will mean one thing to your business and another thing to your religion. Thus, our location in different cultures creates contradictions in what a given sign or artifact means.

#### **Exercise 1.6**

To understand where you fit into a network of cultures, you might take an inventory of yourself. If you really want to understand how cultural artifacts affect people, you need to understand what your own cultural artifacts are and how they are shaping you. On a sheet of paper, construct the chart below, leaving plenty of space to write in.

#### **GROUPS**

#### **ARTIFACTS**

**Typical Events    Typical Objects    Other Typical Artifacts**

Group 1:

Group 2:

Group 3:

Group 4:

Now, start thinking about some of the groups with which you identify the most—in other words, the cultures to which you belong. If you are like most people, there will probably be more than one. Fill in your names for these groups on the lines in the “Groups” column, and for each group, identify some of the artifacts that most clearly manifest that group for you. For example, if Group 1 for you is Native American, which typical events most clearly make that group real and material for you? Which typical objects? Which other typical artifacts? Make similar lists for several other groups of which you are a part.

Now go back and compare the groups of artifacts within each column. Do the typical events of Group 1 relate to the typical objects of Group 2 in any way? Are the events of Groups 3 and 4 connected with each other in any way? Do you find any examples of the same artifact meaning very different things as defined by different groups? In other words, do you find contradictions? To the extent that you find a lack of connectedness, your cultures are complex, fragmented, and overlapping. Later in this book, we will consider what that complexity, fragmentation, and overlap mean in terms of how power is shared and how social and political struggles are managed today.

### ***Cultures Entail Consciousness, or Ideologies***

The second important characteristic of culture is that *cultures entail consciousness, or ideologies*. Let's start with the second of these terms, *ideology*, which has traditionally been associated more closely with culture.

*Ideology* is a widely used term today. There are so many different uses for it that you should expect to find little agreement among scholars as to what it means. For some thinkers, such as Karl Marx, ideology referred to a false set of beliefs and perceptions that the ruling classes attempted to impose upon lower classes in an attempt to make those in lower classes cooperate in perpetuating the power of the rulers. This meaning of the term is explained in one definition given by Raymond Williams, “a system of illusory beliefs—false ideas or false consciousness—which can be contrasted with true scientific knowledge” (1977, 55). Marx's idea was to get rid of false ideas, of ideology, so that people could see things the way they really are. Then, he thought, oppressed people would see the flimsy premises upon which ruling classes built their power, and would rise up and overthrow them. For instance, if the “divine right of kings” could be revealed to be a lot of ideological humbug, then people who had been bowing to kings for centuries could be enabled to see that in reality all people are equal, and they would overthrow their kingly rulers.

That view of ideology as a system of false ideas that hide reality is still held by some, but increasingly the term has come to mean something else. Williams also gives two other definitions of the term that are now more widely used: (1) “a system of beliefs characteristic of a particular class or group,” and (2) “the general process of the production of meanings and ideas” (1977, 55); furthermore, Williams suggests that these two definitions can be combined. This more recent notion of ideology is more consistent with the understanding of culture and artifacts that we have been developing here. To distinguish these senses of ideology from the older sense of false ideas, it may be more useful to think instead of the term *consciousness*, which is more clearly implied by Williams's last two

definitions. To grasp what consciousness (or ideology) should mean, we need to integrate several of the ideas that we have covered so far.

First, recall that people live in a world of artifacts that are accessible only by perceptions. That means that people might change their perceptions, or trade some perceptions for others, but it is not possible to do away with perceptions to discover some bedrock reality underneath. To think that kings rule by divine right is one perception; to think that they do not is another. There are legitimate social and political reasons to prefer one perception over another, but because human beings can only be aware of that which we perceive, it is impossible to identify one set of perceptions as “natural” or “simply the way things are.”

Second, recall that all signs are meaningful, and that artifacts in particular are signs that are charged with meaning. Third, recall that the meaning of an artifact is significantly determined by its link to groups. Finally, recall that culture is a system, or interrelated group, of artifacts. *An ideology or consciousness is an interrelated system of meanings that are generated by the system of artifacts that comprise a culture.*

To return to Williams's definitions of ideology, consciousness is a *system*: The beliefs that make up consciousness (or ideology) relate to each other; they are part of an interrelated set. Consciousness, or ideology, is a system of beliefs—not the way things “really, truly are,” but what people *perceive* to be true. Consciousness is the production of meanings (through artifacts) that are “characteristic of a particular class or group.” It is the system of meanings linked to a system of artifacts that is a culture.

This last idea needs some further explanation. It points to the fact that cultures, or systems of artifacts, are the locations of meanings (beliefs, values, ideas, perceptions). A sign becomes an artifact as it becomes charged with particular meanings that belong to a system. That meaning relates to the meanings of other artifacts in the cultural system; the whole group or system of those meanings is consciousness or ideology. Let's take a cross as an example. This simple sign made up of two sticks becomes charged with meanings of one sort when it is considered as a Christian artifact, or when one places it or thinks about it within that system of artifacts. The cross has one set of meanings when considered in the context of baptism, grace, communion, Christ's crucifixion, and so forth.

The cross takes on a different set of charged meanings for fans of vampire movies, although those meanings are certainly related to the meanings derived from Christianity. This smaller and less cohesive group is nevertheless a system, for the cross relates to the undead, to magical protection, to Count Dracula, and so forth. Finally, consider the meanings that the cross takes on within the system of fashion accessories. Here the sign becomes an artifact as it is linked to earrings or necklace pendants; meanings having to do with design or material (gold or cast iron, slim or stubby) become more important than they do in religious usage. It is realistic to say that the cross is perceived very differently—that, in fact, it becomes a different artifact—for the different groups that use it within their system of artifacts (Christians, vampire movie fans, fashion-conscious people). We will examine in later chapters how the meaning of an artifact can become quite

complex as it shuttles back and forth among these cultural systems. But for now, it is important to understand that artifacts, such as the cross, mean what they mean according to their placement in a system of artifacts, a culture, that is the manifestation of a group.

But those meanings are also often contradictory. We noted previously that contradictions in the meaning of artifacts arise as a result of our identification with different cultures, different groups. We noted how the different meanings read into a sign by different cultures will cause contradictions in what that sign means. But even within single cultures, contradictory meanings arise. When we say that meanings of artifacts arise from groups, we are not saying that those meanings are always simple and straightforward. For instance, the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., is surely an American cultural artifact. But within that "American" cultural system, he means several things, some of them contradictory. He stands for racial harmony and understanding, but also for a turbulent and violent period of our nation's history. For white Americans, he is a promise that they can get along with blacks as well as a reminder of what whites have done to prevent such getting along. For African Americans, he is a moral exemplar of nonviolent civil disobedience, as well as a reminder—through his own violent death—of the frustrations that may make violence seem justifiable. Many cultural artifacts are contradictory in similar ways.

Consciousness or ideology is the sum of meanings, or the system of meanings, that is most obvious or most strongly implied by a system of artifacts. We often refer to such meanings as *preferred meanings*. These are simply the most popular, or the easiest, meanings to attach to signs. There is a Christian consciousness that is the sum of what the artifacts of Christianity mean. The meaning of baptism is linked to the meaning of grace, which is linked to the meaning of communion, and so on. To become a Christian is to enter into that system of meanings, to know them, to see their relationships. That is not to say that Christianity has no contradictions, nor that every Christian embraces the Christian consciousness wholly and completely. But it does mean that there are preferred meanings that make up the Christian consciousness. Since the meanings of many of the artifacts comprising a culture are contradictory, consciousness or ideology also contains the seeds of potential contradiction and instability.

In an earlier exercise, you were asked to identify some group that you are a part of, and to name some artifacts that materially manifest that group to you. Take a second look at that list of artifacts. Can you identify a consciousness that "fits" with a group that you are part of, a set of meanings that you use to make sense of the world, a set that would probably be different if you were part of another group?

We will see in Chapter 3 that people do not necessarily accept the consciousness of a culture to which they belong totally and uncritically. In fact, several factors that we will examine (such as contradiction) make it necessary for people to struggle over what artifacts mean, to pit the meanings of one cultural identification against another. For now, however, keep in mind that whether one accepts it

wholeheartedly or not, there is a consciousness, or an ideology, implied for most people by the artifacts of a given culture.

### *Cultures Are Experienced through Texts*

The third characteristic of cultures that we need to understand is that they are experienced through texts. We have learned that we hardly ever experience the whole of the groups with which we identify, and that cultural artifacts are the material manifestations of those large, abstract groups. Similarly, we rarely experience the entirety of a culture. While there is a set of artifacts that makes the large and abstract group of Polish Americans materially present for individuals within that group, the individual Polish-American person still is unlikely to experience that entire set of artifacts, and certainly never at once. Instead, we experience smaller, interrelated sets of signs and artifacts. It will be useful for us to call those sets *texts*.

The term *text* is important to the study of the rhetoric of popular culture. It is probably most familiar to you as a set of words, in the sense of a linguistic text; and in fact, very many cultural texts are linguistic, since words and expressions can also be cultural artifacts. So this textbook is a text. A newspaper article or editorial is a text. A letter is a text. We speak of the text of a poem, or of a novel.

But as we have seen, words are not the only signs, the only entities with meaning. Things other than or in addition to words can be texts as well. A *text* is a set of signs related to each other insofar as their meanings all contribute to the same set of effects or functions. All the words and parts of this book make a set, because they work together to produce certain effects in you at this moment. But a baseball game is a text, too, because all the signs you see within the game work together to produce several effects: relaxation, exhilaration, allegiance to a team, and so forth. On the other hand, a group comprising your wristwatch, the potted palm on my desk, and Axl Rose in all likelihood is not a text, because (unless something very strange is going on) their meanings are not contributing to the same effects or functions.

A text is usually a set or group of signs, as noted above, but that group can be large or small. To the extent that a single artifact is complex, comprising several signs within itself that all contribute to the same effect, a single artifact can sometimes be read as a text. Michael Jackson, for instance, is certainly a complex enough artifact to be readable as a text in his own right. More often, larger groups of signs and artifacts, contributing to the same effect, are read as texts; an entire Michael Jackson video might be analyzed in that way, for example.

A text is something that people perceive, notice, or unify in their everyday experiences; it is also something that critics or students of popular culture create. A text is something that people put together out of signs, insofar as people unify the meanings of several signs. You might go to the movies and understand the large collection of signs that you see and hear as the text of *The Crying Game* (1992), because you can see that the meanings of those signs work together to create the same set of effects in you and the rest of the audience. On the other hand, you might not think of the next meeting of a class in which you are

enrolled as a text. But suppose a critic were to point out to you how the arrangement of desks, lecture techniques of the instructor, clothing styles of the students, and subject matter somehow all work together as a set of signs with interconnected meanings, all contributing to the same effects or functions. Suppose you had not thought of your class in this way before. In that case, the critic has identified the text, and having had it identified for you, now you could identify it as a text yourself. We will see later in this book that one of the primary reasons for the informed criticism of popular culture is that it can help people to identify texts of which they were not aware.

As we rarely or never experience the whole of a culture (the entire system of artifacts), we can extend our definition of a text by noting that *texts are the ways in which we experience culture*. Suppose we take the whole of rock and roll to be a culture, a system of artifacts. Music, of course, is an important part of that set of artifacts, but so are certain practices such as dancing, going to concerts, and styles of dress and grooming. In addition, there are several subcultures of rock and roll that are more specialized systems of artifacts within the larger culture; such subcultures include punk, heavy metal, folk rock, and so forth. Clearly, we might identify ourselves as "rock and rollers" and yet never experience that entire system of artifacts.

Instead, we might sit down one evening and listen to a new INXS tape; we experience that tape as a text, and that is how we experience the rock and roll culture at that moment. Or we might go to a concert. The whole experience of the concert can function as a text as well, a text made up of the crowd, the security system, dancing in the aisles, whiffs of smoke floating around, and so on. The rock and roll star Madonna herself might be perceived and studied as a text: what she does, how she dresses, how she moves, her music, her public image, her romantic affairs, and so forth.

We will see in a later chapter that for many of the texts of popular culture, it can be difficult to identify the textual boundaries. In the rock concert, for instance, where does the concert begin and end? What is and is not the concert? Some signs—such as the music being played—are clearly constituents of that text. Some signs may be questionable: Is the difficulty in finding a parking place before the concert, or the ringing in the ears after the concert, part of that concert as a unified experience, as a text? Some signs, such as the bird you see flying on your way home from the concert, may clearly not be part of the text. We will think about how to identify and define texts more carefully at a later point.

### Exercise 1.7

To better understand the idea of a text, think about the following examples (two of them your own), and answer the questions (below the examples) that can help in identifying something as a text.

- Your lunch today
- Latest episode of *All My Children*
- Local baseball game, seen live

Your own example (#1)

Your own example (#2)

Answer the following questions for each example:

1. How is this composed of a set of related signs? How do those signs work together to contribute meanings to the same effects or functions?
2. What are some artifacts that make up this text? In other words, what are its constituent artifacts?
3. How does this text "stand in for" other texts or signs in a larger cultural system? How does it represent other cultural artifacts in the same system?

Of course, if something is a text, then it can be *read*. What do we do when we read? We examine signs and artifacts and identify their meanings. That is clearly what we do when we read words. We do the same thing when we experience other kinds of artifacts, so it may be useful to retain the term *reading*, even when the texts we are examining include things other than words. A text, in other words, is something that has meaning, a meaning grounded in the culture behind the text, a meaning that can be examined and understood. We will see in later chapters that those meanings are complex and are often struggled over, since what a text means has a lot to do with power.

Because they cohere around meanings, texts are the ways in which we are exposed to consciousness. A text is the mouthpiece for a culture; it is a representative sampling of the overall system of meanings that constitute an ideology or consciousness that is linked to a group. Texts urge a consciousness on us (and thus they also contain the contradictions that are part of a consciousness). We do not always accept that consciousness in its entirety, but the urging to do so is there nonetheless.

← See us early —

### Exercise 1.8

To understand this point, consider an example of a possible text that you considered a few pages ago: your lunch today. Think about two texts, or two lunches, that two people sitting at the same table might have.

#### Lunch #1

Double martini  
Twelve-ounce T-bone steak  
French fries  
Corn on the cob  
Apple pie a la mode  
Stoneware plate, bone-handled  
knife and fork, plenty of paper  
napkins

#### Lunch #2

Hot herbal tea  
Pita bread sandwich, with avocado,  
alfalfa sprouts, and cheese  
Raw vegetables and yogurt dip  
Simple china plate, stainless steel  
knife and fork, cloth napkin

Of course, an entire consciousness or ideology would only be absorbed after prolonged and repeated exposure to the meanings of a wide range of artifacts within a cultural

system. But each of these lunches nevertheless has a "voice" of its own, and the voice speaks both to and about the diners. Would you say that either lunch shows a consistent set of meanings, beliefs, attitudes, or values? Does either lunch allow you to say something with some measure of assurance about either of the two diners? Could you make a good "educated guess" in response to any of the following questions?:

1. Which of these diners is more concerned about the environment?
2. Which of these diners is a fan of professional football?
3. Which of these diners is female and which is male?
4. Which diner is a Republican and which one is Democrat?
5. Which diner is over 55 and which one is under 40?

The purpose of posing these questions is not to perpetuate stereotypes, but to demonstrate that you probably felt that you *could* answer at least some of them. In order for you to have this sense that you could know the answers to such questions, the text of each lunch must mean something (at least approximately); each lunch must somehow fit into larger systems of artifacts and meaning.

So we have come full circle, back to the question of your blue jeans, with which this chapter began. Suppose you see a man of about age forty, wearing faded blue jeans and a tie-dyed shirt, his long hair pulled back and tied in a ponytail. Furthermore, suppose he is sitting on the hood of an aged Volkswagen Beetle plastered with Grateful Dead stickers, selling homemade jewelry from a battered display tray.

The picture just described is a unified experience—it is a text. Just like the text of an editorial in the newspaper, or the text of a speech by the president, the text of this forty-year-old man is speaking to us. It has meaning, and it is articulating a certain consciousness for us. That picture has a voice—what is it saying? What do the blue jeans this man is wearing add to that voice that would not be there if he were wearing pleated wool slacks?

These questions have to do with *rhetoric*, with how the meanings that we would find in or assign to that text are being managed so as to influence people. Rhetoric is an ancient kind of human activity, and an ancient discipline that studies that activity as well. In the next chapter we will examine that term in more detail, and arrive at a better understanding of how to apply the concept of rhetoric to the texts of popular culture.

## Summary and Review

We began this chapter by posing the question, How do everyday objects, actions, and events influence people? The idea that these everyday experiences of popular culture have an important effect on people should already seem more plausible to you. Rhetoric was defined initially as the ways in which signs influence people, and in this chapter we began to understand some basic concepts that will help us to see how popular culture is rhetorical in just that way. We also briefly noted that influencing other people is a way of securing power.

To understand what culture means, we began with its building blocks: *signs*. Everything can be a sign; a sign is something that has meaning, or that gets you to think of something else. Signs mean in three ways: indexically, iconically, and symbolically. In discussing symbolic meanings, we noted that because symbols are arbitrary and conventional, their meaning is easily changed. And because they are not naturally or permanently connected to their meanings, symbols are imprecise and changeable in meaning.

We defined an *artifact* as (1) an action, event, or object perceived as a unified whole, (2) having widely shared meanings, and (3) manifesting group identifications to us. In discussing that definition, we reviewed some important characteristics that contribute to this idea of an artifact:

1. Artifacts are a socially created reality.
2. Signs become artifacts as they become charged with meaning, thus crossing a threshold into artifact status.
3. An artifact can be very complex, even being made up of other artifacts.
4. Artifacts are the material signs of group identifications.

We defined *culture* as the integrated set or system of artifacts that is linked to a group, and noted that culture in this sense is what we grow in, what supports us and sustains us. *Popular culture*, more specifically, is made up of those systems of artifacts to which most people are exposed. We noted three important characteristics of culture:

1. Cultures are highly complex and overlapping.
2. Cultures entail consciousness, or ideologies.
3. Cultures are experienced through texts.

We learned that a *text* is defined as a set of signs related to each other insofar as their meanings all contribute to the same set of effects or functions. Furthermore, *texts* are the ways in which we experience culture.

Important terms that were defined and discussed in this chapter include *rhetoric*, *sign*, *artifact*, *culture*, *popular culture*, *contradiction*, and *consciousness* (*ideology*).

## Looking Ahead

At this point, you may very well have several questions left unanswered. Let us consider some questions that *should* arise from this chapter, for your consideration and review. You might think about these questions, or discuss them in class, or use them to prepare for later chapters.

1. We have not said very much about power yet. What is at stake in the question of what artifacts mean? Why would anyone worry about that meaning?
2. We have not yet explored the idea of *struggle* very thoroughly. Are there ways in which you would say that popular culture is a site of struggle? For instance:

What happens when artifacts mean several things, or mean contradictory things? Who decides what meanings they will have?

How do artifacts come to have several meanings?

Can the assignment of meaning lead to power and disempowerment? How does that happen?

How can people resist the meanings that others try to impose on them?

How is struggle over meaning conducted? What are the tools or strategies that people use?

- 3. Consider the term *rhetoric*. What other meanings for *rhetoric* have you heard or read? What does the term mean to you? Are there some things or events that you would identify as definitely rhetorical, and others that you would say are definitely *not* rhetorical?

# Chapter 2

## Rhetoric and the Rhetorical Tradition



Has popular culture always been an important site of rhetoric? Not necessarily. To understand why the conjunction of rhetoric and popular culture is especially potent today, we need to understand the history of rhetorical theory. Rhetoric has been around for centuries, both as something that people do and as a subject matter that people study. One thing that is particularly striking about rhetoric is the many different ways in which it has been defined, today and throughout history. In this chapter we will explore some of those definitions. Students of rhetoric are often frustrated with so many definitions for a term; "Why can't people just settle on a meaning?" students sometimes ask. (You may have felt a similar frustration as we discussed different meanings for culture in Chapter 1.) To anticipate that frustration, let us first think about what a *definition* is, and about *defining* as a strategy.

### Definitions in General

You will recall that in Chapter 1 we discovered that the word *culture* has been defined in different ways. You probably also noticed that the ways in which you define certain terms can make a lot of difference; in fact, definitions can be a way of securing power. If you define culture as high culture—as ballet and oil paintings and symphony orchestras—for instance, that lets you reduce to second-class status everything else, including baseball games, cheeseburgers, reggae music, and Disney World. This arrangement makes a pretty nice setup for the wealthy and talented people who already control "high culture," doesn't it? If "culture" is something that people think of as generally a good thing, then being able to define some things and not others as "culture" is a source of power.

If you study history, you find that certain terms have been defined in many different ways. Throughout history there have been varying definitions of what it means to be human. Some societies defined humanity by way of race; such a definition empowered people of one race to enslave whole groups of people who did not look like them, on the theory that they were not really enslaving humans. In this century, Adolf Hitler and the Nazis in Germany attempted to define