

## Culture



# Sense and Non-Sense in Contemporary Ethno/Graphic Practice and Theory

David Howes

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### Article abstract

This essay presents an overview and critique of the “textual revolution” in anthropological theory and practice. The author argues that this revolution, which commenced with Geertz’s suggestion that cultures be treated “as texts” and culminated in *Writing Culture*, has precipitated a flight from theory to style. It is further argued that anthropologists should abandon “the model of the text” and re-learn how to use their senses. Various examples are given of how a more in-depth understanding of cultures can be achieved by sensing them than reading/writing them.

# Sense and Non-Sense in Contemporary Ethno/Graphic Practice and Theory

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*The culture of a people is an ensemble of texts, themselves ensembles, which the anthropologist strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong.*

Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*

*Freed from the social, political, and epistemological constraints of realism, a tasteful ethnography would take us beyond the mind's eye to enter the domain of the senses of smell and taste.*

Paul Stoller and Cheryl Olkes, *Bad Sauce, Good Ethnography*

This essay presents an overview and critique of the «textual revolution» in anthropological theory and practice. The author argues that this revolution, which commenced with Geertz's suggestion that cultures be treated «as texts» and culminated in *Writing Culture*, has precipitated a flight from theory to style. It is further argued that anthropologists should abandon «the model of the text» and re-learn how to use their senses. Various examples are given of how a more in-depth understanding of cultures can be achieved by sensing them than reading/writing them.

*Cet essai présente une vue d'ensemble et une critique de la «révolution textuelle» en théorie et en pratique anthropologique. L'auteur soutient que cette révolution, amorcée par la suggestion de Geertz que les cultures doivent être considérées comme des textes et qui a abouti à *Writing Culture*, a précipité un déplacement de la théorie au style. Il est soutenu plus loin que les anthropologues doivent abandonner «le modèle du texte» et réapprendre à utiliser ses significations. Divers exemples sont donnés pour une compréhension plus approfondie et améliorée des cultures qu'on devrait sentir plutôt que lire ou écrire.*

## Introduction

Who is there to defend “the intention of the author” or “the autonomy of the text” anymore?<sup>1</sup> No one. Every body seems to have gone over to the side of the reader. Witness the recent vogue for “Reader Response Criticism” in literary circles. As David Tracy observes:

*We are in the midst of a deconstructive drive designed to expose the radical instability of all texts and the inevitable intertextuality of all seemingly autonomous texts ... The once stable author has been replaced by the unstable reader. (1987:12)*

This substitution — or desertion, really — presents a grave challenge for the author. What it means (speaking as one author to another) is that we must go to ever more extreme lengths to control our readers' imaginations, to limit the meanings they feel at liberty to impute to our texts. What is the best way to discipline a reader? One strategy would be to open a parenthesis and never close it, so (. This way the reader remains trapped in the text; she or he can never get out of the parenthesis ... save for on our terms)!

Such a strategy must seem silly. “How can one possibly trap a reader in a text?” you may well ask.

That is a good question, and it leads directly to the main theme of this essay: it is precisely such a trap that anthropology has fallen into in recent years, ever since Clifford Geertz (1973: 452) introduced the notion of examining culture as “an assemblage of texts.”

It is the “non-sense” of Geertz’s interpretive anthropology and its derivatives that this essay seeks to expose. In so doing it is also my intention to pave the way for the **reincarnation** of a truly “sensual anthropology” or, if that sounds a bit too risqué, “anthropology of the senses.” The word “reincarnation” is used to emphasize the continuity between the approach advocated here and the cultural anthropology of the 1950s and ’60s, with its stress on “participant observation.” It will be argued that the preference (or fetish) for more “textual” modes of understanding, which came over anthropology in the 1970s, seriously undermined the project that had so preoccupied earlier generations; namely, the construction of a veritably inter-cultural epistemology.

The essay unfolds as follows. Part I explores the predominantly sensual (as opposed to textual) methodological orientation of a work by Margaret Mead and Rhoda Métraux (1953). Among the numerous other works that display a like orientation, and could therefore have been discussed in this connection, those particularly worthy of note include *Do Kamo* (Leenhardt 1947), *Culture and Experience* (Hallowell 1955), and *Eskimo Realities* (Carpenter 1973). In Part II, the focus shifts from the “sensualists” to the “textualists”, the first and foremost of whom remains Clifford Geertz. The development of the idea of interpreting other cultures “as texts” is traced from its inception in the Balinese cockfight article (Geertz 1973) to its conclusion in *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus 1986), where “textualization” figures as the beginning and end of ethnography. Various epistemological barbs will be launched along the way, their purpose being to sensitize the reader to the incongruity of using a textual model to interpret the experience of what are, for the most part, oral cultures (the exceptions all being chirographic). In the conclusion, I argue that anthropologists would be well advised to become less self-conscious about how they write and more conscious about the effects of writing (or rather, print) on consciousness.

The main heuristic concept of this essay is the notion of the “sense ratio,” which I derive from the

work of Marshall McLuhan (1962) and Walter Ong (1967). According to these authors, the ratio or balance between the senses varies from one culture to the next in accordance with the techniques used to perceive and communicate about the world. As McLuhan (1962:55) observed in *The Gutenberg Galaxy*:

*“It would seem that the extension of one or another of our senses by mechanical means, such as the phonetic script, can act as a sort of twist for the kaleidoscope of the entire sensorium. A new combination or ratio of the existing components occurs, and a new mosaic of possible forms presents itself.”*

The implications of this observation are legion, which makes it somewhat troubling that, with the exception of Anthony Seeger (1975) and a handful of others (e.g. Wober 1966, Ohnuki-Tierney 1977), so few ethnographers have taken McLuhan’s message to heart. The essence of that message is that it is the relations between the senses that we ought to be studying, both intra- and inter-culturally, as it is on those relations that our own and the other’s knowledge of the world depends.

Two things should be noted before proceeding. The first is that this essay is full of criticisms of the prevailing trends — its tone, in other words, is very negative — and it does not offer any alternative “vision” or solution to the problems discussed. That is because it would take a whole book to spell out the approach which follows from my critique. As just such a book is soon to be published, I beg the reader’s indulgence and defer any further discussion of the alternatives to textualism to my Introduction to the book in question — namely, *The Varieties of Sensory Experience: A Sourcebook in the Anthropology of the Senses* (Howes 1991).

The second thing is that there are points in the following analysis where my position will seem indistinguishable from that of the authors I am criticizing (particularly the position(s) of Stephen Tyler and James Clifford). I would maintain, however, that “you can’t get here from there” — that is, that one cannot get from “textual anthropology” (primary or secondary) to “sensorial anthropology.”<sup>2</sup> The difference between the two paradigms is subtle, but total as regards how we approach other cultures, and it is only by unthinking (not simply rethinking) the development of anthropology since the textual revolution that we shall be in any position to advance our knowledge.

## I. Pre-text

*Experiential authority is based on a "feel" for the foreign context, a kind of accumulated savvy ...*

James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*

In these heady days when one's reputation as an ethnographer depends more on the "reflexivity" with which one writes than the accuracy with which one "represents" some foreign culture, it is both instructive and refreshing to examine how the preceding generation conceived of their mission as anthropologists. Take a work like *The Study of Culture at a Distance* (Mead and Métraux 1953), for example. The title of that book already implies a certain objectivizing tendency, or attempt at "scientific" observation and description.<sup>3</sup> The contributors to that book were much less self-conscious about writing than we "post-moderns" tend to be, because the idea that language might not be a neutral medium of representation had not yet occurred to them, and they were therefore oblivious of the so-called "politics of representation." But whatever they might have lacked by way of self-consciousness they more than made up for in what can only be called *flair*: the time we spend working on our writing style they spent honing their senses. Consider the following passage:

*just as linguistics requires a special ear ... [so cultural analysis requires a special honing of all the senses, since human beings] not only hear and speak and communicate through words, but also use all their senses in ways that are equally systematic ... to taste and smell and to pattern their capacities to taste and smell, so that the traditional cuisine of a people can be as distinctive and as organized as a language* (Mead and Métraux 1953:16).

This methodological pronouncement contained the seeds of its own destruction—the privileging of linguistics or "language" as a model of and for cultural analysis. But the "stripping of the senses" (McLuhan 1962:17) that the foregrounding of linguistics would eventually precipitate was held in check, at least for the time being, by the emphasis on developing "all the senses."<sup>4</sup>

Rhoda Métraux's (1953) essay on "Resonance in Imagery" is a case in point. It was her conviction that the "images" (visual, auditory, tactile, etc.) through which a people perceive the world form "a coherent whole," not some sort of collage (cf. Taussig 1987). To grasp how a culture's sensory imagery forms such a whole she considered it essential that one

develop a "disciplined conscious awareness of the two systems within which one is working"—that is, of both one's own system of perception and the perceptual system of the culture studied. She writes: "I myself can attend to and retain most precisely visual and kinesthetic and tactile imagery, and I am likely to transpose imagery in other modalities into combinations of these" (Métraux 1953:361).

Métraux might seem to be speaking more as an artist or sculptor than as an anthropologist. But she was not:

*The problem of the creative artist is to re-create and communicate an experience which is essentially personal and interior to himself. The research worker, on the contrary, is concerned with understanding in order to communicate to others systems which are external to himself—what he is attempting to communicate is not a generalized account of his own experience (which would be perhaps an *appreciation* of another culture) but rather an account of the way in which others experience the world* (Métraux 1953:360).

It should be emphasized that developing the capacity to "be of two sensoria" (one's own and that of the culture studied) like Métraux is not at all like being "self-reflexive" in the modern (or post-modern) sense. It was not Métraux's concern merely to reflect upon how her own perceptual biases might affect her observations; rather, she sought to objectify those biases through doubling her consciousness and thereby transcend them.<sup>5</sup>

As an example of the kind of account of "the way in which others experience the world" which Métraux and her circle sought to produce, consider the piece in *Culture at a Distance* on "Russian Sensory Images" (Anon. 1953). The author, a Russian emigrée, begins with a section called "On the Sense of Touch," which is followed by one on smells and another on hearing:

*The dictionary of the Russian language ... defines the sense of touch as follows: "In reality all five senses can be reduced to one — the sense of touch. The tongue and palate sense the food; the ear, sound waves; the nose, emanations; the eyes, rays of light." That is why in all textbooks the sense of touch is always mentioned first. It means to ascertain, to perceive, by body, hand or fingers* (Anon. 1953:163).

Open any North American textbook in psychology—they invariably begin with a discussion of visual perception—and you begin to appreciate (or better, understand) that the ratio or balance between

the senses can vary significantly from one culture to the next.<sup>6</sup>

What most stands out about the Russian emigrée's account is that she begins with a text (the dictionary definition of touch) but does not allow her analysis to rest there. The reason for this had to do with the prevailing methodological orthodoxy: texts and/or verbal utterances (the two had not yet been collapsed into one) were always to be supplemented by "observation" (Métraux 1953:354-55; Clifford 1988:31). These observations were astonishingly acute, as the following excerpt, which exemplifies what is meant by developing an awareness of the two systems within which one is working, attests:

*Russians in general touch each other much less than Americans do. There is hardly any horseplay, slapping on the back, patting, fondling of children. The exception is when one is very happy or drunk. Then he hugs somebody. But that is not touching* (Anon. 1953:163).

Evidently, the economy of touch was not the same in Russia as in the U.S., at least not in this author's experience. What was regarded as normal in the latter culture the Russian would attribute to some altered state or other (drunkenness, happiness). Could it be that the Russian sense of touch was more refined, being more restricted in its expression and hence meaningful, than the American?

Questions such as this would continue to be asked until well into the 1960s. For example, T.R. Williams (1966), a student of Mead's, investigated the cultural structuring of tactile experience among the Dusun of Borneo. However, Williams work already reflected a tendency that would become increasingly widespread, the tendency to study a field of sense in isolation as opposed to the "systematic relationships between images within and among different modalities — visual, auditory, kinaesthetic, tactile, and so on" (Métraux 1953:351, emphasis mine).

This fragmenting of sense, or canalizing of attention, is nowhere more apparent than in Berlin and Kay's (1970) *Basic Color Terms*, a landmark study in Psychological Anthropology. Many regard this text as the refutation of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, the thesis that culture or language "determines" perception. What *Basic Color Terms* in fact demonstrates is that there exist certain universal "focal colours." The evidence for this proposition consists in the fact that people everywhere are able to distinguish between such colours (when they are presented to

them in the form of tinted chips) completely irrespective of how many colour terms their respective languages possess. Berlin and Kay go on to suggest that there is a universal sequence to the discrimination of colour terms such that natural languages can be arranged on an evolutionary scale. This scale ranges from the lowly Dani of New Guinea, whose colour vocabulary consists of just two terms, through various "stages" involving the discrimination of three, then four, then five terms, and so on, until we arrive at our own vocabulary, which consists of upwards of 11 colour words.

The universality of the results of the Berlin and Kay survey might seem impressive, but this uniformity was only possible given the cultural insensitivity of the test they devised. For example, Berlin and Kay never bothered to consider whether the paucity of the Dani colour vocabulary might not be attributable to the fact that they (the Dani) tend to transpose visual imagery into other modalities, or whether the comprehensiveness of their smell or sound vocabulary might not compensate for the poverty of their colour vocabulary, etc. In this regard, an interesting and striking counterpoint to *Basic Color Terms* is Marguerite Dupire's (1987) recent work on the classification of tastes and smells among the Sereer Ndut of Senegal. She found that the Sereer Ndut gustatory vocabulary consists of three terms, compared to our four. Their olfactory vocabulary, on the other hand, is made up of five terms, which is interesting in view of the fact that English-speakers have no olfactory vocabulary to speak of (Howes 1986:39 and 1988: 93-4).

Dupire's work raises the question of why it has taken anthropologists so long to extend the search for lexical universals to other sensory fields than sight. This is a deeply perplexing question. It is as if all the wisdom accumulated during the 1950s and '60s concerning how diverse can be "the pattern of relative importance of the different senses" (Wober 1966:182) was completely lost from sight in the wake of the Berlin and Kay results. How is the anaesthetizing effect of *Basic Color Terms* to be explained? McLuhan provides a clue,

*If a technology is introduced either from within or from without a culture, and if it gives new stress or ascendancy to one or another of our senses, the ratio among all of our senses is altered. ... [Indeed,] any sense when stepped up to high intensity can act as an anaesthetic for other senses. The dentist can now use 'audiac' — induced noise — to remove tactility* (McLuhan 1962:24).

On this interpretation, Berlin and Kay used Munsell Colour Chips to remove the tactility of the earlier anthropology.

However, Psychological Anthropology was not the only field to undergo an intensification of the role of vision in theory-building in the early 1970s. In the following part we examine how a certain visual imperialism also came to infect ethnography.

## II. The textualization of anthropology

*What does the ethnographer do? — he writes.*

Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*.

In the late 1950s and '60s, anthropologists theorized about "participant observation" and the special abilities required to detect and analyze diverse "sensory cues," as discussed above. In the 1970s there was a gradual shift away from the participatory to more textual modes. In England, this shift was marked by the publication of *The Translation of Culture* (Beidelman 1971). In the United States, the displacement commenced with the appearance of "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight," which was reprinted in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (Geertz 1973). As the concept of "cultural translation" in British social anthropology has been analyzed elsewhere (Asad 1986), what I shall focus on in what follows is the textualization of cultural anthropology in America. In any event, the trajectory on both sides of the Atlantic was the same: the substitution of the idea of "reading" other cultures for that of "sensing" or "experiencing" them.

Because Clifford Geertz is such an artful writer, one cannot read "Deep Play" without getting caught up in the drama of the (metaphorical) "status bloodbath" that is the Balinese cockfight. But aside from the textual gratification, or *jouissance du texte*, which Geertz's writing style evokes in us, what insights into Balinese culture does his method provide? That method, call it "hermeneutics," was elaborated in the West, and consists of a body of rules for the interpretation of the written documents of our culture. Obviously, a cockfight is not a written document. It is an event. Events, or social activities, do not possess the same stability as texts.<sup>7</sup> This raises the question of whether the hermeneutic method can or even should have been extended from the study of texts to the study of action.

Taking his cue from the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur, the author of interpretive anthropology

cites various precedents in support of this extrapolation, such as the "*interpretatio naturae* tradition in the middle ages, which ... attempted to read nature as Scripture" (Geertz 1973:449). It is telling that all of the exemplars Geertz adduces (following Ricoeur) stem from within the Western tradition. The culture-boundness of these exemplars ought to have provoked suspicion. But they did not. No less suspect, at least to us, is the tenuousness of the reasoning involved in freeing events or actions from the flow of time such that they could figure as texts in the first place. Consider the following passage from Ricoeur's "The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as a Text" (the *locus classicus* of the extrapolation from script to action):

*what corresponds to writing in the field of action? ... Certain metaphors may be helpful at this point. We say that such-and-such event left its mark on its time. We speak of marking events. Are not these 'marks' on time, the kind of thing which calls for a reading, rather than for a hearing? (Ricoeur 1970:540-41)*

The word play in this quotation is precisely what one would expect of a master hermeneutician. But would this play on words ever have occurred to, say, an Australian aborigine? The following account of what Alexander Chamberlain called the "ear-mindedness" of the Aborigine suggests not:

*throughout North Queensland, the ear is believed to be the seat of intelligence, etc., through or by means of which the impressions of the outer world are conveyed to the inner. So, the natives of Tully River, when they first saw the whites communicate with each other by means of a letter, used, after looking at it, to put it up to their ears to see if they could understand anything by that method (Chamberlain 1905:126).*

Thus, in North Queensland, 'marks' on paper call for a hearing, rather than for a reading. In a manner of speaking, the aborigine's epistemology is the reverse of Paul Ricoeur's. The question for the aborigine is: "What corresponds in writing to the world of events?"

Of course, the epistemological distance between Geertz and his Balinese informants would not have been so great as that between the "literacy" of Paul Ricoeur and the "orality" of the Australian aborigine (Ong 1982), Balinese culture having been constructed on the model of certain Sanskrit texts. Nevertheless, the 'thingification' involved in reducing a social activity like the cockfight to a text (if only for purpos-

es of interpretation) must be recognized for what it is. Activities are not objects in quite the same way texts are. Yet this fact tends to get obscured beneath the thickness of Geertz's description of actions — so obscure, in fact, that many would probably now find acceptable the notion that "societies, like lives, contain their own interpretations" (Geertz 1973:453).

But is the interpretation in the action, or in the text? Talal Asad (1986:162) is very clear upon this point: "if the anthropological translator .. has [or arrogates to himself] final authority in determining the subject's meanings — it is then the former who becomes the **real author** of the latter" (cf. also Lewis 1980 and Paine 1989). In other words, as Asad insists, much depends on who controls the "means of representation."

But the point I wish to make goes deeper. It has to do with the distortion introduced by the very idea of "reading" other cultures. First, what such an approach imports is an epistemology underwritten by seeing as opposed to one informed by hearing, or touch, or smell (or some combination thereof). Thus, there is a certain pre-selection (or better, pre-inscription) of what are to count as facts worthy of interpretation. It goes without saying that in one's efforts to elicit the "native's point of view," no amount of "dialectical tacking" between part and whole so as to "bring them into simultaneous view," as Geertz (1983:69) would have us do, is ever going to correct for this bias.

Second, the ethnographer who allows his or her experience of some foreign culture to be mediated by the model of the text will have no difficulty coming to think of the natives as enacting a particular "interpretation" of the world in their ritual and other activities. But it would be more accurate to regard them as **sensing the world**. What is involved in "sensing the world" is experiencing the cosmos through the mold of a particular sense ratio, and at the same time making sense of that experience. In some cultures, such as our own, making sense of the world often involves reducing it to writing. But writing represents "a visual enclosure of non-visual spaces and senses" (McLuhan 1962:42). Evidently, this is something for which there can be no equivalent in a culture more "ear-minded" than our own. The point here is simply that the ethnographer must guard against projecting his or her experience of the world (an experience which is necessarily bound up with writing and reading) onto the experience of his

or her informants. Métraux would never have committed such an error; Geertz does.

The idea of "examining culture as an assemblage of texts" enjoyed a tremendous vogue in the 1970s, and still does. Nevertheless, the older idea of cultures as perceptual systems continued to exert some influence over the anthropological imagination. This resulted in the propagation of some very peculiar analytic metaphors, such as Alton Becker's (1979) notion of the "text-organ." This notion combines the Geertzian idea of treating symbolic systems "as texts" with the German philosopher Ernst Cassirer's idea of symbolic systems as "organs of reality." According to Cassirer:

*Symbolic forms are not imitations, but **organs of reality**, since it is solely by their agency that anything real becomes an object for intellectual apprehension, and as such is made visible to us* (quoted in Becker 1979:2).

This quotation is glossed by Becker as follows: "Here [in Cassirer's pronouncement] is another powerful metaphor, conceiving of symbolic systems as 'organs' of perception; not what we know and believe, but the means of knowing and believing."

Obviously, a text is a very different "means of knowing" from the nose or the skin. Equally obvious is the way in which the "text-organ" (the sense analogue for which is sight) had succeeded in usurping the space which an earlier anthropology had reserved for the "sense organs" proper—the ear, the nose, the palate, the skin. Thus, in a manner of speaking, the image of the text had lost its status as metaphor. No longer a mere model for the interpretation of other realities, it had become the model of reality itself. No text could better illustrate this point than the following, which is derived from Becker's introduction to the essays in *The Imagination of Reality*:

*To use the word **text** [the way Geertz does when he writes "cultural forms can be treated as texts"] is in form metaphoric, but perhaps **the idea goes beyond the metaphoric** in that a linguistic text, written or oral, may be **the same sort of thing** as a meal, a ritual dance, or a temple, to mention some of the nonlinguistic texts described in these essays. And we can apply our ways of knowing about linguistic texts to these other sorts of symbolic constructions ... (Becker 1979:2 emphasis mine).<sup>8</sup>*

The essays in question were dedicated to Clifford Geertz, of course. All of them evidence an advanced stage of textualization, with one exception.

The exception is Jim Fox's (1979) brilliant essay on oration and ostension as contrasting modes of orientation in the ceremonial system of Savu, eastern Indonesia. Fox's discussion of "modal patterning" resonates with the same vibrancy as Métraux's work.

The passage from sensing to interpreting, which divided the anthropology of the 1960s from that of the '70s led to a further transformation in the early 1980s: the passage from interpreting to dialoguing.<sup>9</sup> Various terminological substitutions can be seen as marking this shift. For example, there is the use of "story-telling" in place of "text" (cf. Webster 1983). Another example would be the use of "negotiation" in place of "description" as in: "ethnography [is located] in a process of dialogue where interlocutors actively negotiate a shared vision of reality" (Clifford 1988:43). Given all the attention paid to the "discursive situation" and peoples' "voices" in this new, more "experimentally" (than realistically) oriented ethnography, one would have thought that the new emphasis would have had the effect of calling anthropologists back to their senses. But it did not. All that this new development has represented, at least in my opinion, is a further traipsing off down the path of the text opened up by Clifford Geertz, a further shift in the direction of non-sense.<sup>10</sup>

How so? Consider the following facts. The basic question which all of us "post-moderns" must grapple with is: "How am I to write with authority?" Malinowski had no problem with this question; he simply wrote. So did most of those who followed him, until the beginning of this decade. At that point a number of texts appeared with titles like "Ethnographies as Texts" (Marcus and Cushman 1982) and "On Ethnographic Authority" (Clifford [1983] 1988). While most anthropologists continued reading the old ethnographies for what they said (Malinowski as an authority on the Trobriand Islanders), the authors of these newer texts started analyzing the older works (particularly Malinowski's) for the rhetorical strategies or "modes of authority" they deployed. Thus did anthropology pass into a stage of "secondary textuality," as distinct from but continuous with Geertz's "primary textuality." This shift is analogous to the transition from "primary orality" (or speaking to one another in person) to "secondary orality" (or communicating by means of radio and television) discussed by Walter J. Ong in *Orality and Literacy* (1982).

What I mean when I speak of the "shift from primary to secondary textuality" is the way many

ethnographers have given up the study of other cultures (as texts) for that of other texts. "In this emergent situation," Marcus and Cushman (1982:26) write in one of the originating manifestos of the textual revolution, "ethnographers read widely among new works for models, being interested as much, if not more, in styles of text construction as in their cultural analysis, both of which are difficult to separate in any case." As this quotation suggests, gone are the days when one could distinguish an author's theory of culture from his or her style of writing culture.

The styles of the new works are, at least in appearance, highly variable: for example, some are written dialogically, others polyphonically, or they may take the form of memoirs as opposed to monographs, etc. What distinguishes them from the old "style" of ethnographic reporting, now known as "realism," is that: "In these experiments, reporting fieldwork experience is just one aspect of wide-ranging personal reflections" (Marcus and Cushman 1982:26). It should be apparent that those of the old school, such as Métraux, would regard these new works as amounting to little more than "an appreciation [as distinct from providing us with any **understanding**] of some other culture," but that is not the way their authors regard them.

What is the reason for the heightened "self-reflexiveness" of the new works? I think the reason for their inner-directedness is primarily textual—that is, the inward turn in ethnography is best understood as an effect of the invasion of consciousness by the idea and practice of "writing." As Ong points out, the kind of sensibility engendered by the interiorization of writing is very different from the sensibility of those who do without:

*orality fosters personality structures that in certain ways are more communal and externalized, and less introspective than those among literates. Oral communication unites people in groups. Writing and reading are solitary activities that throw the psyche back on itself. (1982:69)*

Thus, the increased presence of "the I of the ethnographer" in the new works might seem to be inspired (or required) by their dialogical format, but is in fact motivated by the foregrounding of "writing."

The heightened self-consciousness is otherwise attributable to the general "crisis in representation" provoked by the recent overthrow of traditional canons of authority. As we are told in "Partial Truths," the introduction to *Writing Culture*:



*Many voices clamour for expression. Polyvocality was restrained and orchestrated in traditional ethnographies by giving to one voice a pervasive authorial function and to others the role of sources, 'informants,' to be quoted or paraphrased. [But once] dialogism and polyphony are recognized as modes of textual production, monophonic authority is questioned, revealed to be characteristic of a science that has claimed to represent cultures (Clifford 1986:15).*

Why is it so wrong to claim to "represent cultures" anymore? As far as can be told from "Partial Truths" the reasons are: (1) that we are neither natives nor elected, (2) that to persist in such an endeavour would involve subscribing to "an ideology claiming transparency of representation and immediacy of experience" (Clifford 1986:2), which Clifford obviously regards as a false ideology, and (3) that "the proper referent of any account is not a represented 'world'; now it is specific instances of discourse" (Clifford 1986:14).

It will be appreciated that the limiting of ethnography to reporting on "specific instances of discourse" involves a reduction in the scope of what once passed under this name; namely, supplementing interlocution with observation, and always weighing which informants' version to "write up." Now, however, ethnographer and informant must be equally present in the text if a monograph is to conform to "the principle of dialogical textual production" (Clifford 1986), or be consistent with the new emphasis on "the emergent and cooperative nature of textualization" (Tyler 1986).

Just how "cooperative" or "dialogical" is the "process of textualization" (or what used to be called "fieldwork")? It is instructive to consider the cover illustration of *Writing Culture*. The caption to this photograph reads: "Stephen Tyler in the field." While Tyler might be in the field, he is certainly not of it; rather, he is completely self-absorbed (hunched over his notepad, scribbling away, his informants — one of whom gazes over his left shoulder — evidently quite bored). Is this what it means to be "self-reflexive"? Is this what subscribing to Clifford's principle of "dialogical textual production" entails? Whatever the case may be, the cover illustration of *Writing Culture* certainly illustrates another central tenet of the secondary textualist position: "No longer a marginal, or occulted dimension, writing has emerged as central to what anthropologists do both in the field and thereafter" (Clifford 1986:2) — so central as to have displaced conversation!

Much ground might seem to have been covered in the period between the publication of the Balinese cockfight article and the appearance of *Writing Culture*. But I cannot help suspecting that it was only the tablets that were turned. After all, was not the original idea that: "The culture of a people is an ensemble of texts, themselves ensembles, which the anthropologist strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong" (Geertz 1973:452)? Given that now it is the informant who gazes over the anthropologist's shoulders, it would seem that the positions have indeed been reversed. This leads us to wonder, given Tyler's autistic posture, whether we should not view those original words of Geertz's as having sprung a trap—the trap of the text.

The tragedy in all this is that the trap in question may even have swallowed Geertz himself. This suspicion is based upon the title of Geertz's latest book, *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author* (1988). As one finds upon reading this book, the title is rather misleading since the book is not about the lives of Lévi-Strauss, Evans-Pritchard, Malinowski, or Ruth Benedict (all of whom it treats), but about their works. More precisely, it is about their literary styles, or as Geertz (1988:21) puts it, the "theatres of language" they construct. The ethnographic realities they sought to recount (and the theories they sought to advance) have paled into insignificance. *Works and Lives*, with its thesis that "the way of saying is the what of saying" (Geertz 1988:68), is the most dramatic instance yet of literary involution in anthropology, or the flight from theory to style. To accept its thesis is to fall into the same trap as Stephen Tyler—the trap of an all-encompassing inter-textuality. Is there any way out of this trap? The one way out, it seems to me, is to say "Wrong!" to the suggestion that ethnography, like philosophy, and virtually everything else these days, "might be a kind of writing" (Geertz 1988:1).

## Conclusion

Let us take stock. As discussed in Part I, the generation of anthropologists immediately preceding our own placed much stress on the elaboration of techniques for the effacement of the self, such as "being of two sensoria" à la Métraux. For them, the world was the ensemble of images opened up by the interplay of the senses, the pattern of which was understood to vary from one culture to the next. Then, in the early 1970s, the idea was introduced that

"the world is the ensemble of references opened up by the texts" (Ricoeur 1970:535-36). It was this substitution of the "text-organ" for the sense organs proper that paved the way for the literary involution of anthropology, or the flight from theory to style. And so we find ourselves in the situation of no longer being able to separate an author's "style of text construction" from that author's "cultural analysis" (or theory), the latter having been absorbed into the former. In what Marcus and Cushman (1982) call the "emergent situation," "the way of saying" is not only "the what of saying," it's all there is.

But surely authority is not just a question of style, and surely the epistemological questions the sensualists (Mead, Métraux, etc.) struggled with in their writings deserve consideration in their own right, and not simply as alternative rhetorical postures for the purpose of convincing us that "what they say is a result of their having penetrated (or, if you prefer, been penetrated by) another form of life" (Geertz 1988:4). The point here is that the sensualists do appear to have been better situated (or sensitized) than ourselves with respect to grasping other "forms of life." The reason for their heightened sensitivity is that their perceptions were not clouded by "the model of the text" and that neither was their interaction with informants wholly governed by the demands of "textualization."

To say this is to emphasize that the current "crisis" in anthropology is not one of "representation" (Marcus and Fisher 1986), but still one of epistemology. It is also to underline how much the future of the inter-cultural epistemology for which anthropology once stood will depend on whether we continue on down the path of the text opened up by Clifford Geertz, or heed the call for a return to the senses which has been sounded by, among others, Seeger (1981:81), Ohnuki-Tierney (1981:8-9), Devisch (1983), Stoller and Olkes (1986 and 1987), and the present writer (Howes 1990a and 1990b). To proceed in the latter direction, the direction of sensorial anthropology, will involve developing a disciplined awareness of the one factor Geertz overlooks in his discussion of how anthropologists get themselves "into print." It will entail developing a consciousness of the effects of writing, print, and other such "extensions of the senses" (McLuhan 1964) on consciousness itself. The present essay has provided an inventory of some of those effects. The reader is also referred to Constance Classen's *Sweet Colors, Fragrant Songs* (1990) for an account of the multiple

realities that open up once we stop approaching other cultures through the visually-biased Western order of sensory preferences and start exploring them through their own sense ratios.

## Notes

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2. In this essay, I treat postmodernism in anthropology (or "secondary textuality") as an outgrowth of interpretive anthropology (or "primary textuality"). It is possible to trace other genealogies for the emergence of the postmodern in anthropology. For example, the work of Rorty (1979) and Derrida (1976) has certainly exerted some influence over recent trends in ethnographic theory, and both of these authors are known for their critique of Western ocularcentrism.

I can only say that I am troubled by Rorty's proclamation of the "end of epistemology" on the basis of his deconstruction of the "mirror model of mind," which was peculiar to the West in any case (Howes 1988: 94-4; Tyler 1984). The collapse of that model should not lead us to give up thinking about epistemology altogether, as Rorty suggests. On the contrary, it should be the occasion for us to start reflecting on what the philosophical traditions of *other* cultures have to tell us about how we come to know (see Billeter 1984; Raab 1989).

As for Derrida's work, I am inclined to agree with what Ong says of the deconstructionist critique of Western logocentrism. Ong (1982:168-170) sees that critique as

*still itself curiously text-bound. In fact, [deconstruction] is the most text-bound of all ideologies, because it plays with the paradoxes of textuality alone and in historical isolation, as though the text were a closed system. The only way out of the bind would be through a historical understanding of what primary orality was, for*

*primary orality is the only verbal source out of which textuality could initially grow ... Without textualism [or "writing"], orality cannot even be identified; without orality, textualism is rather opaque and playing with it can be a form of occultism, elaborate obfuscation-which can be endlessly titillating, even at those times when it is not especially informative.*

What Ong says of the deconstructionists also goes for many anthropologists, as we shall see presently.

3. Of course, the main reason for the emphasis on distance in this title is that the idea for the book was conceived during war-time when it was next to impossible to study cultures (particularly enemy ones) up close (cf. Bock 1980:108-9).
4. Perhaps the most basic rule of the anthropology of the senses is that messages in different modalities (smell, touch, taste, etc.) must be analyzed in their own right, and not on the model of the linguistic sign, for the latter has a logic completely unlike that of the others (cf. Gell 1977; Howes 1987a:408).
5. In her concern with developing the capacity to "be of two sensoria," Métraux was very much like James Joyce. According to McLuhan (1962:75), Joyce also "discovered the means of living simultaneously in all cultural modes while quite conscious. The means he cites for such self-awareness and correction of cultural bias is his 'collideroscope'."
6. A McLuhan scholar would explain the Russian propensity to "think in touch" in terms of Russian culture being "still profoundly oral in bias," hence "audile-tactile in the main" (McLuhan 1962:21). Interestingly, McLuhan subscribed to a doctrine (Thomistic in origin) very similar to the Russian one. "I would suggest that 'touch' is not so much a separate sense as the very interplay of the senses" (McLuhan 1962:65).
7. One of the effects of this absence of stability is that it short-circuits the circling between exegesis and text which is so crucial to the (proper) conduct of hermeneutics.
8. It will be recalled that Mead and Métraux (1953) only went so far as to suggest that "the traditional cuisine of a people can be *as* organized as a language." The idea of a meal being the "same sort of thing" as a linguistic text (as in Becker's formulation) remained beyond them.
9. Witness *The Headman and I* (Dumont 1978) or *Tuhami: Portrait of a Moroccan* (Crapanzano 1980). To what extent these works were consciously "experimental" remains an open question. It was their reception that stamped them.
10. These words are intended to echo that line of Ricoeur's which reads: "For us, the world is the ensemble of

references opened up by the texts" (Ricoeur 1970:535-36). For a further critique of this turn of mind see Howes (1987b:3-4).

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