

# Culture by raymond williams essay



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Raymond Williams suggests three broad definitions. First, culture can be used to refer to ‘ a general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development’... second use of the of the word ‘ culture’ might be to suggest ‘ a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period or a group’... Finally, Williams suggests that culture can be used to refer to ‘ the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity’. In other words, culture here means the texts and practices whose principal function is to signify, to produce or to be the occasion for the production of meaning.

In ‘ The analysis of culture’, Williams outlines the ‘ three general categories in the definition of culture’. First, there is ‘ the “ ideal”, in which culture is a state or process of human perfection, in terms of certain absolute or universal values’.

Second, there is the ‘ documentary’ record: the surviving texts and practices of a culture. In this definition, ‘ culture is the body of intellectual and imaginative work, in which, in a detailed way, human thought and experience are variously recorded’.

Third, ‘ there is the “ social” definition of culture, in which culture is a description of a particular way of life’... This definition introduces three new ways of thinking about culture. First, the ‘ anthropological’ position which sees culture as a description of a particular way of life; second, the proposition that culture ‘ expresses certain meanings and values’; third, the claim that the work of cultural analysis should be the ‘ clarification of the meanings and values implicit and explicit in a particular way of life, a particular culture’.

Williams describe as ' inadequate' and ' unacceptable' any definition which fails to include the other definitions: ' However difficult it may be in practice, we have to try to see the process as a whole, and to relate our particular studies, if not explicitly at least by ultimate reference, to the actual and complex organization'.

In addressing the ' complex organization' of culture as a particular way of life, the purpose of cultural analysis is always to understand what a culture is expressing; ' the actual experience through which a culture was lived'; the ' important common element'; ' a particular community experience'. In short, to reconstitute what Williams calls ' the structure of feeling'. By structure of feeling, he means the shared values of a particular group, class or society. The term is used to describe a discursive structure that is a cross between a collective cultural unconscious and an ideology.

We need to distinguish three levels of culture, even in its most general definition. There is the lived culture of a particular time and place, only fully accessible to those living in that time and place. There is the recorded culture, of every kind, from art to the most everyday facts: the culture of a period. There is also, as the factor connecting lived culture and period cultures, the culture of the selective tradition.

Lived culture is culture as lived and experienced by people in their day-to-day existence in a particular place and at a particular moment in time; and the only people who have full access to this culture are those who actually lived its structure of feeling. Once the historical moment is gone the structure of feeling begins to fragment. Cultural analysis has access only

through the documentary record of the culture. But the documentary record itself fragments under the processes of 'the selective tradition'... For Williams, it is crucial to understand the selectivity of cultural traditions. It always (inevitably) produces a cultural record, a cultural tradition, marked by 'a rejection of considerable areas of what was once a living culture'. Furthermore... there will always be a tendency for this process of selection to be related to and even governed by the interests of the class that is dominant'.

Within a given society, selection will be governed by many kinds of special interests, including class interests. Just as the actual social institutions will largely govern contemporary selection, so the development of the society, the process of historical change, will largely determine the selective tradition. The traditional culture of a society will always tend to correspond to its contemporary system of interests and values, for it is not an absolute body of work but a continual selection and interpretation.

This has quite profound ramifications for the student of popular culture. Given that selection is invariably made on the basis of 'contemporary interests', and given the incidence of many 'reversals and rediscoveries', it follows that 'the relevance of past work, in any future situation, is unforeseeable'. If this is the case, it also follows that absolute judgments about what is good and what is bad, about what is high and what is low, in contemporary culture, should be made with a great deal less certainty, open as they are to historical realignment in a potential whirlpool of historical contingency.