The culture of information*

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Culture is the collective act of human cultivation. Culture cultivates a world of humanized forms out of the non-human wilderness of nature. Raw nature does not naturally speak a human language. The purpose of culture is to translate nature’s seeming muteness into meaningful signs and symbols in order to mirror and therefore visibly reflect the forms of human existence. Culture transforms the raw material of the world into a system of communication through which human beings can converse with, and thus relate to, their world. Culture in this sense is a form of ventriloquism by which we project our mental and bodily needs and desires onto mute nature and thus make it speak back to us on our terms.

Culture is thus a general strategy for humanizing the pre-human world, for translating the unknown and the unintelligible into the meaningful and significant supports of human existence. Culture makes the world reflect its human occupants and so enables us to see ourselves as reflections of the cultivated forms through which we refurbish nature. Through culture, nature is made to echo our bodily and mental predispositions: the soil must say food, stone must say buildings, water must say drink, the sky must say space and space must say explore. The human cultivation of wild nature is necessarily the conversion of mute and inarticulate matter into a language of signs and symbols that structure and animate the essential forms of human existence.

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The signs and symbols of human culture do not simply represent a reality external to the body and mind; they constitute it in the very basic sense of constructing a world of forms that respond to our physical and mental needs and desires. The signs and symbols of human culture are not merely tools for knowing and controlling a reality external to us; they are the constituting and constitutive forms of that reality and as such they structure and put into form what was previously unknown and unintelligible.

In his analyses of the development of modern culture, Raymond Williams (1958; 1981) has also emphasized the central significance of signs and symbols in the making of human cultures. When Williams defines culture as ‘the tending of natural growth’ (Williams, 1958: 321), he means that the ‘natural’ is the matter out of which human culture is created. The ‘natural’ has to be articulated or made to speak in human terms. Culture is the cultivation of signs and symbols out of the inarticulate wilderness of nature which Williams (1981) depicts as the movement between material and symbolic production. By ‘symbolism’, Williams (1981: 206-208) means the ‘signifying practices’ that constitute culture as a ‘signifying system’ of ‘active relations’ of continuous production and reproduction. Culture is a set of transformations between the possibilities of raw matter and the signifying practices of the symbolic. The symbolic is thus not merely a means of representing culture but is primarily a ‘means of production’, a way of giving human shape to pre-human matter. The signs, signals and symbols of human communication are ‘material systems of signification’ by which inarticulate matter is made to speak culture. A building may be made out of brick, stone or concrete but we do not ordinarily see the building as a structure of material components but as a domestic house, a church, or a shopping mall. The building signifies itself primarily as a cultural form ready to sustain our existential needs and desires and to reflect back to us the vision we project onto the world of a language we can already speak and understand.

When Williams (1981) says that culture is a ‘signifying system’ of ‘signifying practices’, he means that culture tells us what to perceive and how to perceive. Culture sends signs and signals that articulate meanings by directing our attentions and intentions in more or less specific ways. The signs and signals of culture are thus devices for structuring our actions and thinking; they inform us in the most basic sense of putting us in form. Through its signs and
signals, culture is the original cultivator of information as the structuring of human being. Culture creates forms which answer our basic existential questions of what the world is and how we should act in it. The information of culture provides a foundation for our thoughts and actions in a world that is forever subject to mutation, instability and vacillation. The information of culture translates a world of questions into a world of answers. Question and answer, foundation and unfoundation, are nevertheless intrinsically locked together as mutual motivators. When information puts us in form it also recognizes its mutual dependence on unform as the absence or lack of form. Information is the combined action of informing and being informed in a moment of ignorance or uncertainty; it transforms the unfoundation of unform into the foundation of form. To be in form, to be in a supportive and sustaining structure, depends on knowing what it is to be out of form, to lack structure and direction.

The purpose of cultural signs signals is to inform or structure our thoughts and actions through the construction of specificity and specificities which specify what we perceive and how we perceive (Williams, 1981). The signs and signals of culture inform us by locating our perception in specific places and occasions: we learn to be religious in a church, to be quiet and studious in a library, to be refined and cultivated in an art gallery. The church, the library and the art gallery serve to frame our thoughts and actions and thus represent cultural injunctions which implicitly tell us how to think and behave, just as the words and sentences of a book contain the implicit injunction that we should read them in sequence in order to understand their explicit meaning. In these examples, injunction is an implicit command to connect certain kinds of act with certain kinds of cultural product. Injunction is thus a basic act in the making of form or information when it instructs us to connect otherwise disconnected elements. The informing of information is primarily an act of connecting the disconnected in order to give coherence to an otherwise incoherent world. Williams’s ‘signifying practices’ are essentially acts of connecting the disconnected in which the human body finds its form by connecting with the cultural products that reflect it: the computer and the television set which connect distant happenings to the immediacy of the body’s perceptual system; the supermarket which brings the products of the world to the eyes and hands of the consumer. Information informs by
coordinating the disparities of the world and this significantly includes the human body and its organs. Without such connecting and coordinating, the human being would be worldless and thus out of form.

The ‘signifying practices’ of culture are the means by which information performs its acts of connection. The signs and signals of information connect body and world in a network of directed connections which specify the locations of our attention, telling us where to look, what to look at and how to look. Signifying and specifying are basic steps in the construction and selection of information; they inform us by literally putting us in form. To signify and specify the forms of information is also to affirm and confirm them as coherent and cohering structures which sustain a degree of stability and reliability in the context of disconnection and possible dissolution. For this reason, Williams (1981: 201) stresses the work of culture as continuous production and reproduction. The threat of breakdown and disappearance of cultural forms is ever present so that the cultivation of culture has to be seen as the continuous making of humanised forms and their continuous affirmation and confirmation. Forms have to endure in space and time; in other words, form has to be made firm. The church and its religious practices, the library and its store of readable knowledge and information, the art gallery with its display of aesthetic exploration and exuberance – all have to affirm and confirm repeatedly their significance as ‘signifying systems’ and ‘signifying practices’ against the permanent background threat of breakdown and disconnection. Signifying is thus the transmission of forms across the gaps and intervals of disconnection. Information is affirmed and confirmed through its constant transmission between the elements and parts that contribute to the coherence of a form or message. The perpetual transmission of signs and signals is another way of interpreting Williams’s stress on the production and reproduction of cultural forms. When transmission ceases, so does information. On this view, information is not so much a piece of useful knowledge but more of an existential strategy for saving the appearances of the human world from disintegration.

As the cultivation of mobile forms, culture draws attention to the complex acts of continuous composition that constitute the human world and without which it would clearly not survive. Williams’s interpretation of cultural production and reproduction makes us see cultural forms less as finished
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products and more as ongoing acts of cultivation. Information as a general process now appears as a ceaseless informing or putting into form of a readable and meaningful world but this readability and sense of meaning can never be taken for granted; it has to be constantly reaffirmed and reconfirmed. The continuous transmission of information is essentially the maintenance of sense which otherwise would be lost. The forms of culture are thus in no way intrinsically stable, dependable structures but have to be constantly supplemented by further ongoing moves of affirming and confirming the connections that bridge the disconnections. Informational transmission, therefore, compels us to see information as being mobilised by the threat of its disconnections and hence its dissolution and disappearance. Curiously, this is already reflected in the actual structure of the word inform whose Latin and early English origins included the combined meanings of being in shape and form and being shapeless and out of form. Form and unform motivate and constitute each other; the informing of information is necessarily positive and negative at the same time.

While the conventional interpretation of information recognizes this mutual character, it nevertheless puts the emphasis on its positive side: information is the positive answer to a question stimulated by ignorance and uncertainty; it selects what is wanted and removes the unnecessary. In contrast, Williams’s analysis of the work of culture stresses the negative aspect of form: culture informs us by cultivating forms and structures out of a negative wilderness which inhabits and pervades the essential being of humanity. Culture, for Williams, is the continuous work of repairing and renewing the forms of the human world and which maintains the meaningful connections between that world and its human occupants. Informing in this existential context enables us to see information as a fundamental process in the construction and maintenance of human culture and being.

From this perspective, positive information derives its forms and motive power from its negative complementary field of uninformation. What animates the cultural urge to construct the multiple forms of human life is the permanent background presence of unform with its unremitting threat of the dissolution of information and the loss of sense and meaning. Cultural forms are always supplementary movements of signs and symbols whose essential message is to keep life moving by never stopping. Any stop, any pause to take
in the meaning of a message, is necessarily transient in its anticipation of that which has not yet arrived. We only understand the temporal forms of today, yesterday and tomorrow through their constant movement in which, for example, the presence of today exists only through the absence of yesterday and tomorrow. Williams’s understanding of cultural production has its source in this idea of supplementary movement when he stresses the significance of production and reproduction as the necessarily constant work of the reconstruction and transmission of cultural forms. Production is always also a form of prediction in time in the sense of constructing forms that will be repeated so as to give structure to the future. Tomorrow will be the reconstruction of today so that we can make sense of the future. Cultural production, in Williams’s interpretation, appears as the work of constant deferral in which the forms of information are essentially events that postpone the present in order to keep anticipation alive.

Culture, for Williams, is a process of spontaneous generation as well as conscious production and prediction:

A culture, while it is being lived, is always in part unknown, in part unrealised. The making of a community is always an exploration, for consciousness cannot precede creation, and there is no formula for unknown experience. (Williams, 1958: 320)

The unknown and unrealised is Williams’s way of recognizing the immanence of unformation in culture where human beings are continually working to produce and reproduce themselves as realizable and knowable forms out of the uncertainty and ambiguity, the vagueness and indefiniteness, of the wilderness of pre-culture. Viewed in this way, culture is the never-ending cultivation of human being rather than the accumulation of ready-made cultural products waiting to serve our needs in the art gallery, the museum and the bookstore. To interpret culture simply in terms of its cultural products is to lose sight of its origins in the making of structures and meanings that give existential form to human living. Human being and being human is a generic condition of existence which continually seeks to find and found itself out of withdrawal, loss and disappearance. Informing or making and remaking form is a definitive act in the making and maintaining of human being in its generic condition of instability and dissolution. But the immediacy and routine of everyday acts of living conceal human being as a generic process.
The immediate and routine requirements of work, commerce, shopping, raising children, domestic budgeting, and interpersonal relationships compel us to attend to the specifics of existence rather than to its generic background. Hence the generic question of being ‘dissolves in usability’ (Vattimo, 1992: 51) in which the meanings of life are reduced to the functional specifics of the everyday acts that make up the pressing immediacies of daily living. Conventional understanding of information is also restricted to its instrumental usability which seeks specific answers to specific questions so that the generic significance of information in the making and maintaining of human being is lost. Information is increasingly associated with the globalized use of computers and related technologies in pursuit of fast and immediate communication of knowledge. The contribution of informing to the generic cultivation of the forms and structures that connect us to the wider world of being has been marginalised and even forgotten in the encompassing of daily existence by the culture of usability generated by the various forms of modern communications technology.

To understand human being and information in their generic context, we have to remind ourselves that all living forms begin in an act of distinction or division. Human being itself is an extension of the earth’s raw matter into a form of reflective intelligence which, perhaps strangely, enables the earth to see and reflect itself. In this way, the earth cuts itself in two: a state that sees or distinguishes and a state that is seen or is distinguished. The human is by definition only partially itself. Whatever it sees and distinguishes can only ever be a part of that original indistinguishable mass from which it severed itself and in which ‘it will always partially elude itself’ (Brown, 1969: 105). In its cultural work of self-construction, the human sees parts of the world more specifically but what it sees is ‘only a minor aspect of all being’; its specificity or ‘particularity is the price we pay for its visibility’ (ibid.: 106).

Information theory follows the same logic when it says that information is always the construction and selection of a form or message out of a range of possibilities; selection is always the distinguishing and choosing of a specific part from a larger whole. The informing of human being through distinction thus becomes an essential feature of human existence in both its generic and specific versions. The generic reminds human being of its origins in a primal, indistinguishable and hence missing whole, while the specific reminds us that
our acts of everyday living are informed by partial, transient takes or tokens of a reality which we can never fully capture. All information is thus partial in the very special sense of generating its own latent field of unformation. All new knowledge about the world produces yet further questions which suggests that informational space forever expands into a new order to contain its future forms (ibid.). Since human being is itself constituted by information in its generic sense, it also becomes part of the world’s evolving programme to escape the limits of its own knowledge. Being human necessarily means being partial and being partial necessarily means being part of a missing whole. All this means that human beings do not simply live in the world. As extensions of the earth, they are living parts of the world with which they share a reciprocal identity. This insight reveals human beings less as consciously purposeful agents who cultivate the world for their own convenience and more as ‘sentient-intelligent-movable-attachments’ of the earth which constantly search for and extract information as the necessary basis for existing as partial extensions of a world which just as constantly withdraws from them (Scarry, 1994: 85-86). In this network of attachments the human being and its information technologies become reciprocal extensions of each other.

Generic being suggests another way of thinking human existence. Instead of individuals acting more or less consciously in the wider framework of a society that contains them, generic being emerges out of the unknown and unrealised, seeking always to find and found itself in a context of forces much larger, more extensive and infinitely more obscure than the specific forms of understanding we naturally assume through the usable and taken-for-granted technologies that shape our day-to-day existences. Generic being is the existential work of maintaining the forms of the human world in the context of disconnection and dissolution. The idea of the self-sufficient human agent acting in a rationally purposeful way is replaced by the generic human being which informs and thus cultivates itself through the continuous representation and repetition of meaningful forms that are forever menaced by disappearance. Human being is thus not so much a positive, stable presence but a mobile series of events that continually attempt to structure and repair themselves out of breakdown, unfoundation and disappearance. Information is the informing of human being and the human world out of its
complementary and supplementary genesis in unformation. Seen in this way, human being and informing are coterminous aspects of generic being, each generating itself out of the infinite possibilities of negative unformation.

**The re-lating of information**

Human beings as expressions of generic being have at best a provisional existence, serving as parts in the transmission of movement and the displacement of presence: ‘Parts, in the long run, are the carriers of “being”, not wholes which are no more than the provisional array of parts’ (Fisher, 1991: 213). Parts carry, and what they carry is a fundamental sense of incompleteness and disconnection which compels us to reinterpret wholes as holes or the missing links that source information as unformation. The whole now appears as an all-embracing negative space, an inviting receptacle which, like a mirror, recedes on approach and which can only be sensed through the mobility of the parts it contains. The emphasis on parts reconstitutes our ways of seeing the world. Instead of clearly formed objects with clear meanings and purposes, the ceaseless mobility of parts lateralizes the perception of focused, substantive forms to the gaps and intervals between them: ‘the configuration of parts at any moment is an interval of objecthood that is permutable, reassociable’ (*ibid.*: 213).

Like the letters of the alphabet which can be endlessly combined to produce a profusion of words and sentences and even different languages, parts remind us that we move in a pliable and plastic space of combinability and permutability in which the singularity and apparent wholeness of objects take second place to the generic background in which they exist. Modern technologies of production and communication have created a world in which parts dominate over any sense of objecthood. Mass production focuses on the manufacture of parts which are then assembled into temporary whole objects which in turn become parts in some wider moving assemblage. Information technologies also partialise the world in order to make it more computable and permutable through the binary digit or *bit* of information. The fracturing of the world into bits and pieces makes it more pliable and playable. The negative space and time in which objects exist is seen to be more significant as a source of creative mobility than the objects themselves. Reality itself is
transformed, for ‘at the price of weakening the reality of any single precise object what we have done through the part system is to transfer the reality to the system as a whole and to the play of transformations and possibilities that it invites’ (ibid.: 249).

The modern partialisation of the world also increases the individual’s sense of existential fracture in which human being is experienced as a weakening and dissolution of former stabilities. The individual in the technologized modern world is subject to forces that foreground the experience of relativity: human being is increasingly relativised in space and time through the domination of technologies of communication and information which enhance ‘the inconstancy and superficiality of experience’ (Vattimo, 1992: 59). Partialisation means that there is no naturally durable foundation for human being but only the constant work of finding and refinding itself in a general context of unfoundation and unformation.

Parts relate to other parts in a pliable and plastic background that in itself is a zero condition, neutral, unformed, without character, but which can receive and engender any form or meaning. Parts relate not just to other parts but also to this unplaceable, unspecifiable, all-embracing negative space in which they move. Relating in this context does not simply mean making a connection; more significantly perhaps, it means re-lat-ing the latency or infinite capacity to engender parts and to combine them into multiple and varied forms. Latency is thus another way of saying unformation or the suspension and withdrawal of information as the source of human being in its acts of finding and founding itself. The re-lat-ing of latency is an animating absence which is perpetually and strangely present in all form and information.

The latency of re-lat-ing is like a mirror which reflects the various and changing objects and events that pass in front of it. The mirror itself is like a negative space which only appears through the images it reflects. Without such images, the mirror itself would not be noticeable as a source of visibility; it withdraws when it reflects and thus seems more like an empty space that serves as a supportive background for all the objects and events it helps to re-present. As an empty or negative space, the mirror opens itself to everything it cannot be; it functions as an infinite receptacle for the multiple and
changing forms of the world. The mirror thus symbolizes unformation as the negative space in and through which information is both constructed and sent on or re-lated. Human history itself can be seen as a mirror which reflects not so much its originating events but their later re-presentations. The information and knowledge of history is subject to endless reinterpretation because the post-historical perspectives from which it is seen are also subject to continuous change. And when a book is read by various readers, its readings change as they mirror the particular person, time and place through which the book is read, and the same book read a second or third time by the same reader will present a series of different readings. It is as if the book itself, like the mirror, withdraws to permit a variation of readings to appear. The negative spaces of history and books exemplify the unformation of information out of which emerge the infinite re-presentations that maintain and sustain the work of culture. Like the mirror, unformation is the inexhaustible reserve out of which information develops and in which it circulates.

The negative space of unformation is a latent space waiting to be cultivated as a field of forms. But because it withdraws when approached, unformation resists all attempts to fix and focus it in permanently bounded, stable forms; it is pre-eminently mobile and transient. For this reason, all information is subject to continuous transmission and deferral. Every sign or message is the crossing of a gap or disconnection between terms: between sender and receiver, between the letters of words and the words of sentences. Every crossing or connection is followed by a further gap or disconnection. Like information and unformation, connection and disconnection constitute each other and thus always shadow each other just like the presence of absence and the absence of presence. The so-called information age of the modern world dramatically expresses the alternating complementarity between connection and disconnection, presence and absence, in its relentless pursuit of immediacy. But the unformation of information is destined to withdraw from every attempt to represent it; its latency always exceeds the informational expressions it serves to generate.

Yet the withdrawal of unformation is not complete withdrawal; it is a lateral presence which we see sideways, as it were. It is implicit in all form; it haunts and hints rather than speaks directly. Not a thing in itself, it is more a source of infinite possibilities. Like the mirror which reflects the multiple and
variable figures that pass in front of it, the latency of unformation is a tractile field which can accommodate itself to infinitely variable and changing forms. In this respect, it is like the ‘empty space’ of relativity theory in modern physics which in itself is essentially unlocatable but which serves as a pliable and receptive container for the multiple and mobile contents of the visible and locatable world.

Relativity includes the idea of unformation as a latent and lateral presence in information; the forms of human knowledge and information are always relative to a particular point of view in space and time and hence are intrinsically variable. The relativity of knowledge and information reveals unformation as a source of unfoundation in which information tries to find and found itself. Knowledge and information re-late the latency of unformation by re-presenting the world as a series of deferred signs, symbols and messages. In this sense, to re-late means much more than the expression of an experience or a thought; it also, and more significantly, means translating the latency or negative space of unformation into information. Since signs, symbols and messages are essentially indicator of a receding space and time from which they source their meaning and mobility, they necessarily reflect the hidden fusions and inflections that characterize latency as an ever mobile an ungraspable field. Hermes, the mythic transmitter of information, illustrates the latency of unformation in his role as the trickster who sent messages contaminated by secret meanings and erratic signs. As we have seen, the original structure of the word inform is itself an example of such confusion and ambivalence; likewise, the separate terms production and prediction also reflect a primitive tendency to withdraw into a common verbal structure and meaning. The task of communication is to exorcise as far as possible the inherent latencies of information by limiting their tendency to suggest more information than is required or desired for ease of understanding and transmission. Information has to affirm and confirm itself repeatedly against its own inbuilt liability to lose itself in dispersion and concealment.

Yet latency in its free-floating latitude and occultness, its unlocatability and indefiniteness, is also an accommodating and generous source of all cultural forms. Human being finds and founds itself in latency. What we call culture or society is never a full presence but always an aggregate of variable and
moving forms which includes what we conventionally call the individual human being who sends and receives communications in the routine course of daily living. But since latency is a major source of all cultural forms, including the communications of everyday living as well as their senders and receivers, we are also obliged to think of the individual human being not as a finite, bounded author of his or her life but more as a series of mirroring inflections and reflections of latency. Just as latency has no identifiably stable character, so human being has to recreate and re-inform itself by repeatedly forming and re-forming its acts of being in a world of relative connections and disconnections. The general latency of the world means that everything in it is relative and relational. The conventional way of thinking the world as a more or less stable collection of things now gives way to the recognition that things are simply provisional expressions of the relativities of space and time. Instead of stable things, relativity and relationality constitute the world as a variable and mobile space of events which come and go according to the particularities and contingencies of the occasion, and in which all events mirror each other as reciprocal identities in a complex and dynamic matrix of simultaneity and interdependence. We may conventionally think of the human being as a user of computers, for example, but relativity and relationality compel us to see the human-computer relationship as a reciprocal and symbiotic event in which both terms inform and direct each other.

Human being as relationality invites us to view human culture less as the space of self-contained actors performing their individual lives, albeit in a social context, and more as the ceaseless work of relationality in its connecting and reconnecting with the everchanging relative and interacting forms in which human being continually tries to find and found itself. Relativity and relationality help us to see information as transmission in a new light in which we are the vehicles of transmission just as much as we think we transmit our messages through our technologies of communication. Human being as relationality subverts the conventional distinction between individual and society; the self-containment of social terms such as individual and group gives way to the idea of the ‘integral being’ or ‘fractal person’ in which the relationships between terms rather than the terms themselves constitute the nature of being (Wagner, 1991: 159-173). Part and whole are,
therefore, not distinguishable but ‘integrally imply’ each other. Such integral or reciprocal implication effectively means that the terms of the social and cultural world re-late each other in a general process of reproducing human being as the latency or negative space and time which is always more than the individual expressions it accommodates and helps to generate. The production and reproduction that Williams sees as a definitive feature of cultural work can also be understood as the re-lating of latency through the repeated construction and passing on of cultural products, including the human members of a culture. ‘People exist reproductively by being “carried” as part of another, and “carry” or engender others by making themselves genealogical or reproductive “factors” of these others’ (ibid.: 163). We are thus always borne along by relationality and this includes the signs, symbols and messages of communication which ‘send’ us just as much as we think we ‘send’ them.

Human being now has to be understood as a generic existential process of connecting and reconnecting the relativities and differentials that make up the human world. Being is essentially a continuous process of coming-into-being in contrast to the dominant view of the human world as a reserve of ready-made, finite contents such as the cultural products, including the individuals and institutions of society, we take so much for granted. In the same way, we have to rethink the nature and function of information in this generic context of human being as a continuous process of construction instead of the communication of ready-made, finite terms and forms. Information, as we have noted, is the existential work of putting into form and of maintaining that form by passing it on to others in order to keep them informed and in form. In the general context of the work of human being, information constructs and informs by connecting the disconnected, by re-lating the latency of being. On this view, the transmission of information rather than the informational contents is what carries being along as coming-into-being; the content of the message, the terms and objects it refers to, are necessary locations in the map of movement but they are no more than temporary stopping places for the generic movement of being. Information always moves between its terms of reference and it is in this fundamental sense that it re-lates the latent background space and time in which its terms and contents move. Latency, let us remind ourselves, is the infinitely
extensive and forever withdrawing lateral field of space and time which surrounds, contains and carries all our cultural acts and products. To re-late latency is to recognize it as an infinite, protean source of the world’s natural and human creations and constructions. Latency as the unformation of information, as the suspension and withdrawal of immediate presence, relates itself always as negative background like the mirror which exists only through its reflections or like the raw materials and brushwork that serve to re-late the recognizable subject of a painting. The re-lating of latency reminds us of the compositional work that informs all knowledge and information; it tells us that all our cultural products are the results of continuous acts of composition in which we are constantly forming and informing human being and its world of identifiable forms. The transmission of a message has to include the preparatory work that connects the individual letters and words that constitute the message so that the message re-lates more than a manifest meaning by implying that its covert construction originates in an unbeatable field of latent possibilities which are given transient expression as the relativities of relationality.

**Information and the architecture of mind**

The re-lating of information and form returns us to the essential idea of cultural production and reproduction as presented by Williams (1981: 201). When Williams says that production is the translation of raw material into the ‘specificities’ of signs and symbols, he implies that production is essentially the translation of the latent possibilities of raw matter into the myriad specifically locatable positionings and significations that make up the ever mobile and changing relativities of the cultural world. Contrary to the conventional view of human being as a scene of self-contained subjects and objects with identifiable social natures and missions, relationality reveals being as less of an already completed scenario of narratable representations and more as an incipiently unstable field in ‘which the drawing of boundaries and the tracing of shapes are still somewhat aleatory’ (Bersani and Dutoit, 1993: 218), immanently subject to the complex and mobile interactions and intermittencies of relationality. The actions of human being are essentially concerned with drawing boundaries and tracing shapes in order to give form and sense to the mobile mixture of relativities generated by relationality.
Human being is thus the compositional work of cultivating cultural forms in order to re-late them in space and time. This means that the latency of relativity and relationality is present as an immanent pre-sence in all human activity, and which our re-lating translates into meaningful information through the ceaseless productive connections we make in the course of daily living. Without these productive connections, the products of culture – and this includes ourselves as beings – would clearly not exist. Cultural production is human being as continuous compositional work in which we are composers and compositors of relational events. Without the direct physical and mental participation of the human organism in the construction and maintenance of its world, there would be no human forms, no culture, no world. Relationality makes us see the moving connections between things and the contribution of these moving connections to the active production of culture: the bodily gestures that make raw earth into brick, bricks into buildings, buildings into architecture, architecture into living culture – without these physical and mental acts of connection and composition, there would be no forms to inform us. Information and informing necessarily depend on human acts of connection and composition. We may see the world mainly as a repository of ready-made things and structures that are external to us and which serve our convenience but this way of thinking blinds us to the existential relationship between things and ourselves in the everyday activity of structuring our being.

Just as we construct and connect with the forms of culture that give meaning and significance to our being, we also have to recognize that these same forms form and inform us. Relationality implies the mutual existence and interaction of terms; each term in a relationship implies the other. It is the act and action of relating that animates the informing of information rather than the individual terms and messages that serve as the content of the informing. The message spoken or written by the individual person is also the individual person spoken or written by the message (Wagner, 1991: 166). The individual person is thus never a singular part of the more inclusive whole of a group or society. Individual and group ‘integrially imply’ or re-late each other and are neither part nor whole but both part and whole at the same time. Here again the latency of relationality cannot be grasped as an actual thing but serves as a vacant or negative space forever ready to receive and contain the multiple
and multiplying products of human being and its cultivation. Relationality relates latency through the mobilities and mutations of intermission and transmission. Latency is what is always extra to human requirements, always in excess of meaning and the limits of understanding, always lateral to the objectives and objectifications of human thinking, always out of sight and therefore out of (conscious) mind. Latency also means that information is always partial and intermittent, never complete; every answer ‘integrally implies’ a further question so that information is never finished but is always supplemented by its latent field of unformation and its latent promise of the what-is-not-yet of unformed possibilities. The latency of relationality is related in information never as a full and direct presence but always as a trace of something that can never be made immediate, an absence that recedes from all attempts to represent it. Information theory itself implies the significance of latency in its formal recognition that information emerges out of uncertainty and ambivalence, out of an excess of possibilities. To inform is to represent the pre-sense of uncertainty and ambivalence as the presence of presentability or structured form. In other words, representation re-lates the rawness of latency by representing it as a sign or message that we can at least make sense of in the generic work of being. Yet, significantly, re-lating, no matter how presentable it may seem, is always ghosted by the latency and pre-sense from which it emerges, just as information is primally enfolded with unformation.

Relationality reveals information as the transmission of forms in a field of incomplete parts. To re-late is also to reflect the essential incompleteness of parts which attempt to seek some sense of completeness by connecting with other parts of the field. Human being is the constant search of body and mind for meaningful connections in a field of disconnections. There is no self as such, as a thing-in-itself; the so-called self is an incomplete part of another part which re-late and reflect each other. Representation in this sense is less the conventional idea of a pattern, picture or model which symbolizes some absent structure (MacKay, 1969) and is more like an act of correspondence between partial terms that live through each other: the photograph, for example, is no longer simply an object external to us that we look at, for it re-lates and informs us just as much as we re-late and inform it. As partial terms, we are essentially transmitting stations for the re-lating and re-presenting of
human being in space and time. Information as the constituting basis of human form-making and transmission is itself therefore necessarily partial and incomplete, always informed by the lack of form. Partial and incomplete, human being and information are fated always to defer themselves in their relentless search for some sense of completion.

The modern world epitomizes this radical sense of deferral in its inexorable pursuit of reality through the mass projection of messages and images. Reality now appears to us not as something out there which we represent to ourselves but as the actual transmission of information and knowledge. In the modern world of generalized communication nothing is more real than the continuous disappearance of reality. The mass media project information as if they were searching for its ultimate but unapproachable origin in unformation. What now appears to be the moving purpose of the various forms of the media is the creation of a condition of de-orientation and weakening of reality rather than the traditional expectation of transmitting reliable information in order to orient and inform (Vattimo, 1992). The transmission of relationality and its implicit latency both imply that indefinition, uncertainty and ambiguity are the prime movers of informational transmission rather than the contents of messages that specify and direct us to particular actions. The mass forms of transmitted information suggest a negative background from which they emerge as incipient, aleatory outlines with no definite messages to convey. We begin to glimpse that stage of human being in which the forms of information are still coming-into-presence and which have not yet attained a state of full representation. Understood in this way, the mass transmission of information suggests a latent state of no settled sense or structure in which the parts of forms seem to float in suspension and in which the forms themselves double-back to their origins in acts of withdrawal. We are left with the suspicion that the world of human being is a field of hyperactive composition which is forever trying to capture itself as a scene of representable forms and ideas but where, at base, there is no ‘sharp distinction between the real and the fictive. between human nature and human artifice’ (Bersani and Dutoit, 1993: 171).

Culture in the age of information appears more like the ceaseless exploration of human being to escape from its physical and mental limits than the search for informational support in the form of answers to specific questions. The
globalisation of the world by information technology can be seen as the
generic reaching out by human being to that latency beyond itself which is
also the source of being as *becoming*. The *becoming* of human being is also a
*beckoning* to become what it is currently and presently *not*. Human being
always lives *outside* itself, always expresses itself through external forms
through which it re-presents itself to itself. The computer re-presents the
human central nervous system in order for human being to extend and expand
the space and time of its existence and the latent possibilities that computer
technology reveals to it. In other words, the computer re-lates the human
body and its sense organs to the generic latency of its wider world. In this way,
body, nervous system, sense organs, computer and wider world re-late each
other. The computer becomes part of the cognitive architecture of the mind,
and the body itself becomes mind in its extensive relationality with its
external *field* of existence. In this way, information technology has to be seen
as part of the architecture of human being. The conventional view of
architecture as the production of buildings to contain and protect the lives of
people also suggests that buildings are extensions of the human body and
mind which help liberate human being from its physical limits; the building
is a cultural development of the body’s need to escape from itself so that
architecture cultivates forms of human being that reach out to the latent
spaces of the world. Architecture cultivates the latent potential of the earth.
It translates the raw matter of the earth into the bricks and stones that
building uses to construct a house; the house then becomes an expression of
human being and culture in the form of an identifiable base for the further
cultivation of cultural possibilities. Architecture in this sense contributes to
the ceaseless movement of human being; its products are vehicles in and
through which human being travels beyond itself.

The cognitive architecture of the human mind is also a vehicle for physical
and mental movement. Like the architecture of building, it also provides
structures in which human being can dwell and create further spaces for itself.
The bricks and stones of the building are reflected in the letters, words and
numbers that cognitive architecture uses to construct its means for
transporting human being beyond its immediate limits. The computer, the
television set and the telephone are themselves technological extensions of
the conventional building and its furniture; each represents the restless
human endeavour to create a more mobile world in which body and mind can reach beyond themselves in the forever evolving work of being human. The technologies of cognitive architecture are essentially parts through which the human body and its organs connect with the informational supports and possibilities of their surroundings. In this respect, the human mind is itself part of a wider mind which is never complete and is thus always mindful of its animating source in that pre-sense which lies beyond its own presence. The pre-sense of mind and information is the yet-to-be-organized space of the earth’s raw matter which has to be composed and re-composed into the meaningful forms of culture. The bricks and stone of architecture become a wall, the wall becomes a room, the room becomes a house, and the house in its turn becomes an address in a town or city. The earth’s raw matter, translated into architectural brick and stone, becomes a vehicle for cultural movement through which human being and mind seek to move beyond themselves. The address of a house is essentially a location by which the mind finds its directions and its freedom of movement. In the cognitive architecture of information-processing, a similar construction occurs when the letters of the alphabet become words, when words become sentences, and when sentences become messages. Individual letters and words have no location until they are placed in the wider framework of the message where they serve to move the mind on to further locations. Cognitive architecture combines with conventional architecture when it eventually locates the bricks and stones of building in an address which is further located in a map of a town or city.

When Raymond Williams thinks of culture as the production of signs and symbols out of raw material, he is also suggesting that cultural production is a form of prediction or the locating of the elements of raw material in a followable and foreseeable order and sequence just as the house is given an address in a specific street in a specific town or the letter and the word is given a predictable meaning in the order of a sentence. The act of locating is also an act of informing or making form through speech and language which project cultural forms onto the muteness of raw matter. Locating makes the unformed world speak back to us on our terms; it ventriloquizes the dumbness of a world that is originally indifferent to human language. Cultural production for Williams is the locating of parts in a predictable sequence so that they fit
together in order to give structure or form to our everyday actions. The manufactured parts of the motor vehicle not only fit together to make a more comprehensive assemblage but the production of the vehicle is also structured to fit together with the road and traffic network. The production of the vehicle is thus also the prediction of its future locations beyond the factory. In this sense, industrial production becomes an essential component of the wider world of cultural production in that it contributes to the making present of the information that informs the enhanced mobility of modern life.

Locating is also the mind’s method of translating the generic into the specific. Williams’s idea of ‘specificities’ is a version of location in an ordered system of space and time; it answers such basic informational questions as *what, where, when* and *how*. Locating is the way the mind finds and founds itself out of the unformed pre-sense of unformation. It locates the ‘specificities’ of culture in a mindscape of mobile representations which are also injunctions to think and act in certain ways: the church tells us information about religion, the school about education, the department store and the supermarket about goods to purchase. Each of these examples represents the complex translation of unlocatable matter into the ‘signifying practices’ of locatable information. God, for example, is traditionally said to be unlocatable in the sense of being everywhere and nowhere at the same time but this does not prevent us from placing ‘him’ in a location through which ‘he’ can speak to us. Unlocatability is a defining feature of unformation as the originary pre-sense of information. Mind is the generic awareness of something that cannot be placed in the meaningful systems of human culture. The work of mind is the continuous construction and selection of specific forms and messages out of this unlocatable and unpresentable space. Scientific information theory calls it unpredictability but predictability in the context of the present discussion has to be understood as the *production* of *prediction* or the construction of informational maps that serve to guide and inform the acts of human being in its cultivation of space and time. Outside such informational maps, human being begins to lose itself, but mind as a generic state of awareness is activated and sustained by its informational incompleteness, by its recognition that what it knows is also informed by what it does not know. The mental field is permanently inhabited by an unknowable remainder which serves to re-mind it of its sources in an indistinguishable origin which both
recedes on approach and returns on retreat. This means that all cultural production produces unpredictability in space and time as well as predictability. Modern science is perhaps the most dramatic example of knowledge production whose findings provoke even more questions about the physical nature of the world: the more we seem to find out about the physics of raw matter, the less certain we are about the informational significance of our findings. Universal computerization, while flooding the world with information, has also revealed the world to be an inexhaustible informational remainder which, strangely, appears only to disappear. The more that knowledge and information seem to advance, the more we are left with the strange impression that they enable us to see that which cannot be seen.

The work of mind thus goes beyond the work of human being itself to suggest that it is moved by forces it can never fully know and realize. Mind is evoked and provoked by that which exceeds its work of locating and informing, by that which resists the cultural conventions and routines of everyday life. Mind may create information as practical guidelines for human being, it may extract information from the vagueness and ambiguity that pre-exists its cognitive organization, but its mindfulness is rooted in what it is not, animated by a negative space and time that refuses to be represented in the signs, symbols and messages that sustain the sense of immediacy generated by the informational transmissions of daily existence. Mind occupies a no-man’s-land that lies between information as immediately locatable, useful knowledge of the world and the latency of unformation which taunts and tempts mind with its unlocatable promises of new informational worlds of creative composition and permutation.

references


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Robert Cooper (1931-2013) was a prominent theorist of organization, known for introducing postmodernism and post-structuralism to organization studies. He has also been highly influential in process studies of organization. After writing and publishing poetry in his early years, and a PhD at Liverpool University, he held academic positions at various English universities – Aston, Lancaster, Keele – finally ending as an honorary Professor at the University of Leicester.