Dreams of presence: a theory of culture and landscape

Book Proposal

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1. Rationale

While Miller's (1994) "Material culture and mass consumption" is often lauded for its reconfiguration of how anthropologists traditionally approach the material flotsam of modern society, there is also, at the heart of the argument, a significant reconfiguration of how we approach the question of culture. For Miller, culture only comes to appear as a phenomenon as it emerges in tangible visible forms. Rather than conceptualising culture as a set of internalised social patterns (e.g. patterns in kinship, religious practice, social stratification, economic exchange, etc.), Miller sees it as something a self-conscious subject externally "takes-on", that is, something a subject invests in as it becomes materially available. The proposed monograph builds on this perspective by proposing a theory of culture as an *exteriority*. Drawing upon the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (1969; 1978; 1981; 1987), the text introduces a conception of subjectivity that locates the origin of cultural identity outside the subject. In this framing, culture is not something a subject can ever properly *have* - i.e., identity is never *ours* to represent, reinterpret or creatively perform. On the contrary, culture is conceptualised as an asymptotic desire – an idealised notion of collective identity situated upon a horizon that the subject can never reach. Culture, therefore, has no actual *presence*. Its appearance cannot be thought to coincide with any standing capacity within the subject at any threshold of consciousness or knowing. Rather, culture appears as a "dream of presence", it is an idea or imagination of presence that subjects cultivate as they move toward it. In this framing, what subjects experience as culture is only ever the ongoing movement towards culture. And what they narrate as culture is the culture they desire to have. Culture is constituted by the fact that it persists as an imagination, that is, as an idea coveted by a subject but never attained. The significance of this manoeuvre is it positions material culture as a fundamental means by which a subject's identity comes to appear. At one level the argument reinforces Miller's thesis that material objects manifest culture's presence. But it arrives at this position via a different ontological ground. What materiality manifests, I argue, is culture as a dream of presence. It is precisely because culture has no ontological home, no origin in the subject or in the world, that its presence requires material expression. Thus while I (like Miller) understand culture as something that persists through its articulation in material forms, I do not understand those forms as representing or reflecting a culture already rendered (at some level of knowing) present. Culture, I argue, has no existence outside the objects and expressions through which it appears. It is only ever a dream of presence: a desire that can be marked (through objects and other expressions) but never properly possessed.

2. Reasons for Writing

The motivation for this project first emerged out of my doctoral research on the cultural landscape of the Giza plateau in Egypt (the site of the three largest Egyptian pyramids and the Sphinx), where I have been conducting periodic fieldwork for the last ten years. What consistently intrigues me about the Giza landscape is its capacity to endlessly draw out and gather diverse ideas about what it means to be Egyptian. And yet, despite this diversity, the landscape is simultaneously thought to stand for something that is unique ó something singular stable and unchanging. This seeming incongruity led me to Levinas whose conception of subjectivity is predicated on a similar paradox. For Levinas, a subjectøs sense of self is constituted not by interior constructs (e.g. an ego, consciousness or soul) but in response to exteriorities ó demands originating from outside the subject. In Levinas, the subject has no interior anchor, no resident and abiding ‑selfø guiding its existence. It only has a ‑sense of self,ø an image whose existence relies upon being marked out through various concrete external forms. The implication of this position is it situates the origin of identity *outside*, rather than within, the subject. Thus, our everyday homes and landscapes are not reflections of an interior self (as they are often rendered), but on the contrary, are the very means by which an interior self is imagined. While Miller and others would argue that anthropology has a long history of conceptualising identity as externalised, performed and distributed, I would argue there often remains a tacit unacknowledged artefact of an abiding interiority; a remnant we find in notions such as ‑practical consciousnessø (Bourdieu 1990), pre-subjective ‑desireø (Butler 1993) or the ‑sensing bodyø (Tilley 2004). The aim of this project is to suggest that culture has no interior anchor, no internal origin; no standing capacity (whether cognitively or corporeally conceived) upon which a theory of culture can subsequently be built. It is to undermine the last remnant of the self-standing subject in order to make a coherent theoretical statement about the exterior nature of culture.

3. Summary

People will buy this book for three reasons:

- *It develops a unique theory about the relationship between culture and material objects.* The monograph develops a novel approach to Material Culture Studies (MCS) through a unique conceptualisation of the anthropological subject predicated on the work of Emmanuel Levinas. While the argument no doubt critiques various aspects of MCS, it simultaneously strengthens the broader theoretical agenda of this tradition by illustrating the fundamental role of everyday objects in the constitution of social relations.

- *It illustrates how the work of Levinas can reorient traditional approaches to cultural theory.*
  The work of Emmanuel Levinas has yet to have much impact in anthropology. The text will describe the relevance of Levinasø work to anthropological thought and illustrate how his ideas allow anthropologists to address old questions (e.g. the question of culture) in a new light.

- *It re-kindles a debate about the relevance of the 'culture concept' for modern anthropology and geography.*
  Since the advent of postmodern anthropology in the 1990s, the concept of culture has gone significantly out of favour. While the reasons for forsaking =grandø cultural theory are no doubt compelling, the proposed project attempts to illustrate how culture remains a salient concept. In this sense, the monograph endeavours not simply to develop a theory, but rekindle a debate. It endeavours to re-invest anthropology in a traditional topic of disciplinary thought.

4. Contents list

The monograph is divided into seven chapters: an introduction and three sections comprised of two chapters each. The outline is as follows:

- Chapter 1: Introduction

  Section 1: The subject of culture
- Chapter 2: Four subjects
- Chapter 3: A critique of self-presence

  Section 2: The site of culture
- Chapter 4: Heideggerøs dwelling
- Chapter 5: Levinas and the subject that never arrives

  Section 3: Culture as an exteriority
- Chapter 6: Dreams of presence
- Chapter 7: Fundamental Materials

5. Contents Summary

Chapter 1: Introduction

Chapter 1 launches the text by re-conceptualising the central question of culture. Rather than asking =what culture isø or =how culture works,ø the chapter poses the question of why: why does culture appear? Why does it exist as a seemingly self-present force active in the process of naming and circumscribing the self? In order to address this question, I argue for an approach that does not address the nature of culture, but more fundamentally, the nature of subjectivity. What is it about the subject that needs or requires culture? Once the central question is posed, the chapter describes the main argument and discusses the bookøs organisation and format, focusing specifically on the textøs three sections: section 1 (the subject of culture) situates the argument within the anthropological literature; section 2 (the site of culture) describes the textøs central philosophical position; and section 3 (culture as an exteriority) illustrates how this position allows

us to think about culture and material culture in different terms. By the end of the chapter the reader will have a firm understanding of what a dream of presence means, how Levinas is used to develop the thesis and how the thesis re-orients the study of culture in general and material culture in particular.

Section 1: The subject of culture

Any theory of culture must, at some level, advance a theory of the subject ó a theory that establishes the metaphysical, ontological or pre-ontological structures that make the ‑taking upø of culture possible. Whether it is acknowledged or not, theories of culture rely on certain assumptions, understandings or conventions for thinking about who a subject is, how a subject works and/or what a subject can do. And yet, despite this fundamental relation between theorising culture and theorising the subject, cultural theory has often shot ahead with the former without a clear account of the latter. The reason for this, as this section will illustrate, is that cultural theory has a long history of assuming the subject to be *self-present*. The term self-present is borrowed from Heidegger (1996) to characterise a subject that is self-consciously self-available. By self-present I do not simply mean present to oneself, but *self*-present to oneself, that is, present to oneself as a self. The self-present subject is characterised by its self-knowing; a knowing that is not necessarily about knowing with clarity or understanding (the self can know herself as a mystery), but knowing that someone (a self) is there. The self-present subject senses herself and speaks for the self she senses, even if she does not speak with coherence or certainty. She hears herself thinking and knows that the thinking voice belongs to her; naming herself to herself. In the void the self-present self still knows of her own existence; answering for herself, in the dark, even if no-one arrives to ask. The purpose of this section is to illustrate the persistent presence of this self-present subject in the annals of anthropology and to describe the problems it creates for cultural theory.

Chapter 2: Four subjects

This chapter organises modern cultural theory into four broad categories, each of which is defined by a particular way of rendering the subject. The categories are: (1) the constructed subject, (2) the performative subject, (3) the relational subject and (4) the worldly subject. The aim of the chapter is to illustrate how in each of these renderings the subject is ultimately rendered as self-present. Even when certain theoretical manoeuvres are designed to think the subject otherwise (as in the case of performativity), I illustrate how they end up re-instating the self-present subject at a different threshold of consciousness (e.g. at the level of a pre-conscious ‑knowingø or a corporeal ‑sensingø). The point is that in each case a residual artefact of interiority (a pre-established capacity that resides in the subject) is consistently salvaged in order that a fuller theory of cultural identity can subsequently be built.

Chapter 3: The trap of presence

While the previous chapter illustrates how interiority continually re-appears in cultural theory, this chapter discusses why interiority is a problem. Specifically, it argues that locating culture within the self-present subject necessarily positions the origin of culture in a set of ontic conditions. Thus, subjects have culture due to a series of sociological or psychological needs (e.g. for self-sufficiency, status, power, meaning and significance, etc.) rather than a set of ontological, or indeed, meta-ontological demands. The aim of this chapter is to make the case for culture to be positioned outside the subject, in a location that is derived philosophically rather than garnered from the taken-for-granted recognition of culture and cultural difference.

Section 2: The site of culture

Section two begins the work of arguing for culture as a dream of presence. It does this through an involved discussion of Levinasø ontology of the subject and an illustration of how this ontology lends itself to a conception of culture as an exteriority. Levinasø conception of the subject, however, is a radical reinterpretation of the ontology of the subject proposed by Heidegger ó i.e., Dasein. The section begins, therefore, with a close analysis of Heideggerøs concept of Dasein and a discussion of how that ontology develops within it a specific conception not of culture, but more fundamentally, a site where culture can be thought to reside ó what Heidegger calls the dwelling. It then examines Levinasø re-conceptualisation of both the subject and the dwelling and illustrates how this reinterpretation lends itself to thinking culture as an exteriority.

Chapter 4: Heidegger's dwelling

Heideggerøs concept of dwelling has a long history in his work, from its rudimentary appearance in *Being and Time* (1996), to its fuller development in his later essays (1971; 1977; 1998; 2000). The purpose of this chapter is to illustrate how the concept of dwelling works to solve a problem at the heart of Heideggerøs ontology - what might be called –the problem of perspective.ø The problem of perspective is a problem that necessarily follows from Heideggerøs positioning of Dasein as being-in-the-world, namely, how does a being, whose being necessarily inflects and reflects the world, gain perspective, i.e., come to understand herself as an independent subject? The point of the chapter is to illustrate two things: (1) how the dwelling, as the site of culture, solves this problem for Heidegger and (2) how this resolution ultimately affirms the subject as a self-present being in Heideggerøs work.

Chapter 5: The dwelling we can never inhabit

The chapter explores how Levinas re-works Heideggerøs project in radically different terms. It begins by explaining Levinasø overall conception of the subject. For Levinas, the subject is not a being conceptualised as always already in the world. On the contrary, subjectivity is something primordially elicited, its origin residing in demands, problems and imperatives beckoning from a

place irretrievably outside the subject, calling us into diverse modalities of being. The subject has no presence before such demands. Rather she emerges from them, taking her place in the world in the form of an answer (a response). While there are several consequences that follow from this perspective, what is relevant for our purpose is that this conception of subjectivity situates the subject as a being that is fundamentally *vulnerable*. Because the subject is reliant on callings and demands located outside her, she is, in her very essence, dependent on and exposed to the exteriorities that gift her her being. Given this situation, the dwelling appears to the subject as a potential retreat or reprieve. It is a place, Levinas suggests, where the subject can be at home with herself; a source of security and comfort; an evasion or escape from its vulnerable situation. In this sense, the dwelling is something a subject seeks, even covets. The paradox, as Levinas explains, is that the dwelling does not actually mitigate or limit the subjectøs exposure. Our being is essentially and primordially a result of dynamics outside us, and while dwelling holds out the promise of reprieve, it does not and cannot provide a new foundation for existence. Thus, the dwelling marks a desire for security rather than its actual attainment. The dwelling, in Levinas, can never be properly inhabited. It simply marks a need for inhabitation, a desire for security and shelter in a world were we are perpetually exposed.

Section 3 Culture as an exteriority

The final section of the book develops Levinasø conception of the dwelling into a specific theory of culture. As previously suggested, the dwelling, for Levinas, is a place that the subject =comes toø through her desire to escape from her condition of exposure. It is a site of comfort and warmth, a place where one finds =meaningø and =filial relationsø The dwelling, in other words, is not something we are always already within but something we seek; something that can provide shelter from the condition of exposure. If we understand this shelter as the site of culture (the philosophical foundation upon which a theory of culture can be thought), then Levinas provides us the means to think about culture as something that, in its essence, resides outside the subject. The aim of this section is to develop this relationship between culture and the dwelling more carefully and illustrate how this relation provides new opportunities for cultural research.

Chapter 6: Dreams of presence

The chapter illustrates a conception of culture as a =dream of presenceø The term =dreams of presenceø comes from Derrida (1978) to denote the long-standing philosophical desire to account for how things exist (are present), without recourse to their history or a knowledge of their potential. A dream of presence is, in essence, a dream of a stable, knowable world. It is the dream of a life that is blind to immanence, impervious to movement and invested in with certitude. In suggesting that culture is a dream of presence, I am, at one level, reiterating the well-rehearsed idea that culture, as a specific articulation of collective will, is imagined. However, I am also

suggesting that it is an imagination that emerges from a specific ontological situation. Drawing upon Levinasø conception of the subject, the book presents culture as a particular modality for seeking a dwelling. Culture encloses a rendering of being-in-the-world that the subject (in its exposed situation) seeks, but can never properly inhabit. Culture, therefore, is a dream in both senses of the term: it is a dream because it is an imagination and it is a dream because it is unattainable. Culture is a pipe dream ó an imagination that is seductive precisely because it is elusive. In this sense, culture has no actual presence, i.e., it is never something that ever properly exists. And yet, it exists as a dream: an idea that is perpetuated by the fact that it is (and must be) pursued.

Chapter 7: Fundamental materials

The concluding chapter illustrates how conceptualising culture as a dream of presence fundamentally re-writes not only how we think about culture, but how we go about doing cultural analysis. In arguing for culture as a dream of presence, I position the phenomenality of culture as being anchored in the concrete forms in which it appears. Such a framing gives added significance to material culture, and other forms of cultural expression, since without the acculturated subject, such forms become the only means by which culture can come to exist as a phenomenon. As previously suggested, culture has no ontological home. It is asymptotic, an idea that perpetually withdraws into the distance. Thus, its appearance must rely upon tangible demonstrations outside the subject, i.e., sites, performances and rituals that subjects use to mark their presence in the world. By way of conclusion, I draw upon my ethnographic fieldwork on the Giza plateau in Egypt to illustrate this mode of analysis. In contrast to traditional understandings of landscape, the Giza plateau is not conceptualised as a reflection or expression of interior cultural worls, but on the contrary, is taken to be the very means by which -an ideaø of such cultural worlds comes to appear. In illustrating how the concept of a dream of presence can be applied, and demonstrating the kind of insights that can be gained from its application, the chapter both reviews and ties together the primary arguments of the text.

6. Writing Schedule and world length

The manuscript is seven chapters 6-8000 words a piece, totalling about 60,000 words. Three of the seven chapters are now drafted and I expect to submit a final version in December 2012.

7. Artwork

The manuscript will have no diagrams, special formatting or textual features but may include a few black/white photographs taken by myself.

8. Readership

While the proposed monograph is aimed at an advanced audience, I have a long track record of communicating complex theoretical ideas with clarity and in everyday language. While the monograph includes a chapter at the end devoted to application and illustration, this will not be the only reference to real-world situations and events. Indeed, if one looks at my publications to date, you will see the continued use of small examples and illustrations to elucidate my points (see attached article); a style I will no doubt bring to this project. Thus, while the main audience for the text is senior scholars and PhD students, my commitment to intelligibility will make it accessible to Masters students and advanced undergraduates. In terms of disciplinary catchment, it speaks to three main areas: anthropology, cultural geography and cultural studies (though as a text devoted to the question of culture, it should also have relevance to sociologists and philosophers). I discuss each of the main areas below:

- Anthropology: As a text anchored in the Material Culture tradition, it naturally speaks to this audience. The book directly engages with the literature in this sub-field, and as previously suggested, it augments arguments made by Miller, Tilley and others about the fundamental significance of material culture in the constitution of identity. That said, the book is also about the nature of culture more generally. Thus, it will speak to the discipline of anthropology as a whole, and indeed, attract scholars in the diverse and varied fields where culture continues to be a concern, including sociology, political science and literary studies.

- Cultural Geography: One of the aims of the proposed monograph is to answer a long-standing call in geography for geographers to make a unique contribution to cultural theory. While there is a well-established tradition in cultural geography for studying material culture (landscape interpretation has been one of the discipline's core sub-fields since the early 1930s), the tendency has been to adapt ideas from Cultural Studies (in the UK) and anthropology (in the US) to geographical concerns. While the book's primary audience is anthropology, it uses a distinctly geographic perspective to make its argument; a perspective that frames the question of culture as first and foremost a problem of dwelling, belonging and 'being-in'. Given human geography's ongoing interest in questions of culture, identity and landscape, the book will have resonance with a widespread geographic audience.

- Cultural Studies: because the text engages with questions of culture through the language of existential phenomenology and post-structural theory, it will also find a tertiary market in the broader area of Cultural Studies. Anyone interested in examining how Heidegger or Levinas can be applied to anthropological concerns, will find the text useful.

9. Competing Titles

The proposed monograph is similar in style and ambition to the following texts:

- Danny Miller (1994) *Material culture and mass consumption.* Blackwell: 250 pages 23.99

- Tilley (2004) *The materiality of stone: explorations in landscape phenomenology.* Berg: 243 pages 18.99

- Tim Ingold (2000) *The perception of the environment: essays in livelihood, dwelling and skill.* Routledge: 463 pages 29.99

Each of these texts provide compelling theoretical arguments for the fundamental role material objects play in the constitution of cultural identity. In addition, they all use specific philosophical positions (Miller via Hegel, Tilley via Merleau-Ponty and Ingold via Merleau-Ponty, Marx and Bourdieu) to justify their unique approach. While the arguments I make are very different, the proposed monograph is similar in that it develops a theory of culture (and its relation to material forms) by reconfiguring the philosophical ground of anthropological thought.

10. Biography

I am currently a lecturer in the Department of Geography at the University of Hull, where I teach courses in cultural geography and cultural theory. While my regional expertise is on the Middle East (Egypt in particular), my publications to date reflect my continuing interest in cultural theory (see CV). Specifically, I have been involved in the development of what is often termed 'non-representational theory': a trajectory of theory, influenced by phenomenology and post-structuralism, that is broadly characterized by a rejection of humanism, an interest in affect and a general attention to that which escapes representational analysis (emotions, enchantments, absence etc.). My contribution to this literature has involved re-conceptualizing traditional sociological categories (such as 'culture') in non-representational terms. The proposed monograph is an attempt to synthesize these ideas, which have been in development for almost a decade, into a more substantive theoretical statement.

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