

Rethinking body language in terms of power relations: adopting a cultural studies approach

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Abstract

The paper will examine power relations via body language, as an aspect of non-verbal communication. Studies of body language arise within such divergent (and often isolated) disciplines as semiotics, psychology, and performance studies, while published works are further divided between the popular and the scientific. Popular works are often accused of being simplistic, while many of the specialised scientific works on non-verbal communication ignore the wider social context in which body language occurs.

Because the Cultural Studies approach explicitly links power relations and communication, it is able to offer a framework in which disparate threads from different disciplines can be drawn together to facilitate a broader understanding of body language. Body language is thus as important a tool of the Cultural Studies project. It complements other aspects of communication studies, which have hitherto tended specifically to concentrate on studies of television, radio, newspapers, film, magazines and other media, or on studies of interpersonal communication.

Rethinking body language in terms of power relations:

Adopting a cultural studies approach

Cultural studies has developed in an intimate if critical relationship to academic knowledges



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... Agenda of research have been found in the everyday life of subordinated social groups, or in sides of daily life which 'serious' analysis has ignored. Very often researchers have sought to understand personal pilgrimages or blocks. Cultural studies, in other words, has been formed in a highly contradictory relationship between academic knowledges and political aspirations (Johnson, 1986:277).

The focus of this paper will be to work from Johnson's analysis of cultural studies, to rehabilitate popular texts and 'everyday experience' of body lan-

guage from their subordinate position as 'academic knowledges' and to locate text/experiences, in terms of the cultural studies paradigm outlined by Johnson, in the context of power relations in South African society.

It has been the intention of cultural studies to examine what was formerly regarded as unworthy of academic appraisal due to its designation as 'low' or 'mass' culture. Cultural studies is thus concerned with explicating the relation of power to culture and communication in whatever form (Punter, 1986:9).

Body language studies have existed on the periphery of much academic debate and this paper contends that a cultural studies approach to body language is long overdue. There are three strands to this argument. Firstly, many unacknowledged areas of overlap exist between cultural studies and body language studies and exploring and extending them would be mutually enriching for theorists. Secondly, body language studies offer an area of praxis with which to evaluate many cultural studies theories. Finally, enmeshing all these strands are the power relations that underpin both the academic discourses and the socio-economic contexts of the topics under discussion.

This paper puts forward two proposals: firstly, that an examination of power relations can provide a contextual thread to link body language studies and their social contexts; and secondly, that a cultural studies approach to body language is urgently required to provide a theoretical paradigm in which to conduct an examination of these power relations. Illustrations used will be drawn from applications of these theoretical constructs to a South African context.

Before examining specific aspects of the debates that serve to link them, it is

necessary to define the cultural studies project, and the term 'body language' for the purposes of this paper.

At the outset it is necessary to recognise that *cultural studies*, like the allied terms 'culture' and 'ideology' which it investigates, is a highly contested field which is continually repositioning itself contextually. It is unlikely that this polysemy will be readily resolved.

Attempts at developing an overarching theory of cultural studies centre around the tension between the subjective 'culturalist' perspective of the individual and the social forms or structures foregrounded by the 'structuralists'. Focus has shifted from an investigation of the three problematics within cultural studies outlined by Johnson (Clarke:1979)¹ to Stuart Hall's examination of culturalism and structuralism, which acknowledged that neither of these could provide a self sufficient paradigm to study culture /ideology as their mutual antagonisms had no promise of an easy synthesis (Bennet, 1981:36).

Johnson (Punter, 1986:277-307) resolves the central tension between culturalism and structuralism by viewing them as parts of a process represented as a circuit of the production, circulation and consumption of cultural objects. What is then attempted is to look at specific 'moments' in these circuits of culture. Each moment depends on others and is linked to the whole but each involves distinctive changes of form; real transformations. These circuits exist in relation to the level of representation (related to production), ranging from public to private; and the level of abstraction (related to consumption), ranging from the concrete to the particular (Punter, 1986:284).

The application of cultural studies methods to body language provides

an area of 'concrete analysis' (Bennet, 1981:34), which could serve to demonstrate aspects of the operation of power relations at moments in these circuits. 'To understand (different readings of cultural objects) properly – as transformations of meaning – we would have to grasp the specific practices through which the product was 'consumed' or 'read'. These conditions include all the asymmetries of power, cultural resources and knowledge that relate readers to both producers and analysts, as well as the more fundamental social relations of class, gender, race and age' (Punter, 1986:284-5).

In refining cultural studies methods, in order to attain an understanding of different cultural objects, Beezer *et al.* state that we must apply 'techniques or methods of analysis from a variety of sources, (which) include methods of narrative analysis, commutation techniques, questions designed to probe the text/reader relation, discourse analysis and simple methods of content analysis. None of these are conceived of as watertight procedures which will yield inevitable results; rather our aim is to reveal the patterns, contradictions and tensions within (the) research material' (Punter, 1981:95,96).

To understand the need to search for such patterns we need to know more about body language studies.

Due to the multidisciplinary nature of previous work on the topic, literature on *body language*² can be found in such diverse areas of discourse as anthropology, dance theory, linguistics, semiotics, sociology and psychology, as well as in the popular press and magazines. Much of this work has been conducted in relative isolation (Davis, 1972:vii). Different discourses have used their own operational terminology which has resulted in duplication or re-

plication of studies and often contradictory terminology.

The publication of Julius Fast's book, *Body Language* (1970) brought the term into popular parlance. Body language has been defined as an aspect of non-verbal communication. In certain instances 'body language' and 'non-verbal communication' are used co-terminously. In its widest understanding, body language can include gestures, movements and some aspects of dress (Goffman, 1959:42), timing and spatial awareness (E.T Hall, 1955). While some would argue that the terms non-verbal communication and body language can be used interchangeably, to do so is to obscure their difference at the level of discourse in terms of power relations. Body language as a term is explicitly linked to power relations on two levels. Firstly, at the level of academic discourse it is linked to 'popular' works which have been disempowered in terms of the popular/scientific debate. Secondly, in its usage in popular works it has been associated, via marketing strategies, with the promise of personal empowerment of readers in the context of their social relations.

The operation of power relations, at various moments in Johnson's cultural circuit is demonstrated at both of the above levels, by the application of cultural studies methods and theories to body language studies in the South African context. Areas of overlap between the two foci (body language & cultural studies) of this paper, will be examined in terms of power relations operating at various moments delimited by Johnson.

Epistemology and Power

Body language was established as a subject of serious academic interest in 1972.³ Subsequent literature on body language has been divided in terms of

'traditional academic disciplines' (Davis, 1972:3 and Davis & Skupien, 1982:xiv). The pervasiveness of these disciplines could themselves suggest the manner in which power relations within the western academic tradition have led to the continuation of divisions between researchers working in different areas – the politics of knowledge. As Foucault has argued,⁴ 'Knowledge and the control of knowledge is inseparable from the question of power relations': the 'effects of truth are produced within discourses which in themselves are neither true nor false' but which serve the interests of the 'hegemonic class'.⁵ Further division between 'popular' and 'scientific' works may have been fostered by social science practitioners anxious to gain academic approval within the 'scientific-academic' paradigm. A situation which is itself a result of a power relation, the respect with which the 'scientific' method is treated is due largely to the status which science has achieved within the Western academic tradition in the last two hundred years (Bedford & Wang, 1985:436-8).

Privileging of academic knowledges has resulted in the subordinate position of popular texts relative to academic texts.⁶ Popular works may appear to be simplistic, in terms of the 'scientific paradigm', while specialised scientific works on non-verbal communication, which focus on a few variables in an effort to be 'scientific', ignore the wider social context in which these variables may be operating. Power relations form a part of the matrix of these social contexts.

A comparative analysis of titles of an academic and a popular work can serve to illustrate the initial difference in discourse.⁷ Academic writing on body language treats of power relations at a remove, as a second order discourse. Writers who publish for academic au-

diences, and who generally prefer the term 'non-verbal communication' tend to speak of 'status displays' or 'manifestations of deference and respect' and thus avoid dealing overtly with power relations – in their attempts to attain objectivity. Despite the fact that such terms may appear to be more transparent in the context of academic debate at the micro-level of interpersonal communication, they are still removed from an examination of power relations at the macro-level of social structures.

On the other hand by promising readers power over other individuals in social situations which involve interpersonal communication, popular writers touch on power relations at the micro-level but they too, fail to deal with how power relations at the macro-level impact on the body language of members of a society.

Removing overt mention of value judgements from academic publications in an effort to obtain 'objectivity' may simply result in ignoring these 'subjective' values, which are nonetheless important variables operating in social contexts. Power relations are just one variable which has been removed from discussion, but not from life practices or daily reality – what Johnson terms 'lived' experience.

Massification and the promise of Power

Power relations operating at the *moment of production* can be read as a media relation whereby the promise of power attained through knowledge of body language is held out in the *popular media* to the *disempowered*.

Popular writers have avoided lengthy discussions and footnotes, one requirement of scientific-academic discourse, in order to appeal to a wider public; and as such may seem, in academic terms, to be dealing superficially

with their topics. It may be that the commercial aspects of publication have led popular writers to offer their readers power over themselves and their communication situations, by offering them knowledge of how body language works.⁸ A possible reason that readers require vicarious empowerment is that they have been disempowered in industrialised society.⁹ The need to offer a substitute for power can be found in the old cliché of religion being the opiate of the people. In the modern world, this function, has been usurped by marketing and media practice.

Marketing

Popular works on body language have formed part of a *market* that includes the likes of Dale Carnegie, Norman Vincent Peale and the travelling show – the American mass market. This can be demonstrated by examining advertisements for other publications on the flyleaves of popular works.¹⁰ Such para-scientific associations have tended to reflect adversely on the image that is held, in both academic and popular circles, of body language publications.

As an inter-disciplinary enquiry, cultural studies challenges the established disciplines; a brief historical evaluation of popular and scientific works on body language studies (Davis, 1972, 1982) demonstrates that they are more inter-dependent than they initially appear to be. Knowledge of subordinate groups – the masses – can be rehabilitated via its historicity. It is thus that the subordinate knowledges in 'popular' works and lived experience of body language can be rehabilitated via its historicity.

Prior to Darwin, body language records can be obtained piecemeal from historical descriptions of dance and mime, books on manners, oratory (eg. early Greek and Roman writings) and

occasional references in literature and art. While some would argue that knowledge accumulated by performers, by which I mean actors, dancers, and mimes, has had no influence on 'scientific' behavioral research, there are three notable exceptions. In the area of dance ethology, anthropologists, dancers and dance notators have collaborated to a degree. In the field of dance or movement therapy, many former dancers are becoming mental health professionals and participating in behavioural research. Finally, the theories and movement analysis system of Rudolf Laban, a noted dancer and choreographer, have influenced behavioural research (Davies, 1972:1-11). It thus becomes apparent that in practice there has been a reliance by academics on what could be regarded as non-scientific sources. Popular writers have often trained in the sciences, (eg. Desmond Morris is a zoologist), or base their writings on 'scientific' studies despite their lack of extensive footnoting. In the interests of enriching research it would be fruitless to ignore contributions made by practitioners in any field as a great deal can be gained by examining popular and scientific works concomitantly.

Johnson's conception of 'public' and 'private' forms cuts across the popular/scientific divide. For Johnson, the public forms are those which range across the whole social surface; though they are differently attended to, understood and used by different social groups (Punter, 1986:287). In terms of this understanding, the media, academic and professional knowledges, discourses on high culture or high politics – are public channels which fertilise the discourse of 'public' forms. Cultural moments which are dubbed 'private' are more hidden, both from the public gaze and the social worlds of others. These forms are not

private in the sense that they are of personal relevance to individuals only, as the strength and limit of these 'private' forms lies in their particularity and concreteness. They are adapted to the life conditions and historically produced needs of particular groups. They are embedded in daily life. 'Private' matters do appear in public. They may even be given meanings similar to those through which they are lived by subordinated groups – they are private forms, publicly represented. This is why, once we understand cultural differences, subtle *differentiated* readings of public forms can be made. But public forms tend to frame and evaluate such representations in ways that bend them back to middle-class and male definitions of significance, or at least contain their potential for disturbance. Readers must still take into account the *particularity of readings*. *'In general we should not assume that public-ation only acts in ways that seem demeaning to the relevant actors, or act, in practice to repress (288)*. One way to contain disturbance is to represent the experiences of social groups as pathological as problems not of society or of power but of the mal-adjustments of the social group' (Punter:288).

So far this paper has looked at popular works on body language in order to rehabilitate them, by revealing their production (they can no longer be regarded as mal-adjustments to the academic process of writing). This paper will now consider the "forms" and "readings" structured within academic knowledges by conducting a brief examination of the following areas of overlap between body language and cultural studies practitioners, namely: semiotics; communication & media; social psychology, including body image and patriarchy; and the culture and ethnicity conundrum. These areas of overlap can be viewed as *moments*

of consumption in terms of Johnson's model.

Semiotics

Visual anthropologists have been the most active in attempts to study body language as a signifying system through the analysis of film and photographic material in terms of *semiotic* theory. Semiotic analysis thus provides a complex link underpinning debates within cultural studies and body language via media and communication models and technologies.¹¹ Studies of body language can include forms of signalling other than those that exclusively involve the body, such as costume, setting and props (Cohen, 1987; Goffman, 1959). Goffman deals with the ability of the individual to present many different social faces through his or her body language in different social environments.

One of the problems that has arisen with the treatment of body language as a signifying system is that the endeavour to ascribe specific meanings to specific instances can lead to a situation which ignores the contextual situation of such signs, as well as the continuity in their execution. While isolating body movements may break up an interaction into analyzable units, it must be remembered that such movements exist in isolation only in the eyes of the analyst.¹² The attempts of social scientists to conform to 'scientific' practice, provides an instance when the operation of power relations within academia has led to the misuse of a linguistically derived method.¹³

The scientific method is not always appropriate even to the physical sciences: as developments in quantum physics have shown, even the actions of atomic particles are not always predictable. Abstracting linear methodology from the physical to the social sciences is inappropriate when such

methodology is rigidly applied to human actions, precisely because human beings and social systems are always changing. In the social sciences it is only possible to examine moments in social processes. What must be remembered is that these processes are constantly changing.

What must be avoided, in Johnson's view, are the structuralist foreshortenings of Formalism, whereby the account of production is reduced. Semiology foreshortens when it neglects the human activity of producing and substitutes for all this the 'productivity of signifying systems'. Texts are abstracted from their discursive contexts, the surrounding social relations, and the particular historical moment, due to such foreshortenings. Johnson argues that in order to recover a fully social language theory it is necessary to go outside the French semiological traditions, to the critiques of Saussure marshalled by the Marxist philosopher of language V.N. Volosinov¹⁴ (Punter:298). Volosinov saw in each word or sign a dialectic between the inner experience of the individual psyche and the ideological representation derived from the social and material conditions in which each individual exists. Meaning in this view is understood as part of a process rather than in terms of a closed system.

One method adopted/extended from semiotics by cultural studies is the development of an understanding of the research topic as a social text and the inclusion of a consideration of power relations in this process. Body language studies can thus be 'read' as socially constructed texts in order to deconstruct their contexts. The operation of this methodology was shown above in the 'reading' of titles and fly-leaves of popular works.

A South African illustration of such a reading can be provided via an anecdote

involving the 'semiotics of handbags'.¹⁵ A professional Black male walking through town sees a White middle class female approaching him. As she notices him, she shifts her handbag into a more secure grip – holding it firmly against her body, she hurriedly glances at him, then away, as she moves rapidly past him.

What does this mean? A deconstruction can be attempted in terms of age, class, race and sex.¹⁶

* Age – Youth are perceived as being a particularly violent threat to existing power relations, especially black youth due to the so-called 'Culture of Violence'. Black youth are perceived as politicised and as having moved away from the 'Culture of Education' to which white youth, are perceived by White South Africans to subscribe.¹⁷

* Class – Historicity is important here. For the black male such an encounter could be embarrassing, as it will reinforce his position as a member of a subordinate class who will be potentially dangerous to the white female, a member of the dominant class. Fear, on the part of whites, is emphasised in the context of social change, as whites are afraid of what will happen to them when the power order is reversed and they will be subordinated under what they perceive as black domination.

* Race – Race and power are explicitly linked in South Africa. Due to the social engineering of apartheid (and the implementation of the Group Areas Act), race groups in South Africa have lived in racially separated areas. Lack of social contact has resulted in increased mistrust amongst different race groups.¹⁸

* Sex – Females will often feel threatened sexually and socially. This perception, which derives from their subordinate power relation in a patriarchal society, is heightened if other fear fac-

tors, eg. darkness, loneliness of the locale are also present.

The above example would be influenced by its historicity. In the first place, the fear of physical violence indicated in this reading could also be related to the larger context of the current poor South African economy. Increased unemployment and frustration at the lack of opportunity could result in people wanting to lash out by reacting violently and aggressively. The experience and fear of crime is a real 'every-day' experience for all sectors of South African society.

Context is important: a cluster of other gestures associated with fear would confirm this 'reading', otherwise the concrete/private nature of action may mitigate against its abstraction. Without any of the other fear indices, the woman in our example may have shifted her handbag due to physical discomfort.

In the wider context of general mistrust and fear due to political and economic instability in South Africa, we see 'private tension' as a manifestation of the larger socio-economic tension to which it is related.

Communication

Communication studies have tended to concentrate on either the macro – (television, radio, newspapers, film, magazines) or micro-levels (interpersonal). Body language falls between these two enquiries. Drawing on structural linguistics and cultural anthropology, Birdwhistell argues that while body movement is one 'channel' of communication, it consists of culturally-learned units which are patterned in ways analogous to language and which serve in the maintenance, regulation, and definition of face-to-face group interaction. The 'meaning' of one's movement is in this view to be found at the group level, in the effects

the behaviour has, and its place in the stream of communication. Body language is one code within the culturally coded communication process, and should thus be deciphered at the multi-channelled social level (Birdwhistell, 1970). The kinesics research of Birdwhistell and some psychiatrists interested in small-group and family communication has resulted in discoveries of synchrony, regulation and organisation of group behaviour. This needs to be extended beyond an examination of the surface representation of the social contexts to the power relations in terms of which these groups operate. Birdwhistell spoke of culture and related body language to culture and language, but not to the power relations that order these social relations.¹⁹

Cultural studies is also endeavouring to attain some understanding of media practices, production processes and effects, and is therefore dealing with communication theorists. Most body language practitioners have not been critical of the communication models which formulate or underpin their methodologies. Many fail to understand the pervasiveness of the Shannon and Weaver model of communication.²⁰ Again this seems to illustrate the dominance and persistence of certain methods and understandings of academic knowledges. The CMR model (of Shannon and Weaver) was in essence an attempt to apply quantitative, linearly derived understanding, taken from the physical sciences to the human sciences. Cultural studies thus provides a critically reflexive framework for such an analysis by placing this model in its socially derived context.

Media Distribution Practices

Another *moment of consumption* can be understood by examining body language texts in relation to *media distribution practices* and the power relations that determine such practices.

Many popular works, demonstrating with, and analysing, photographs extensively, in terms of the Western aesthetic, have been distributed internationally, the most popular in South Africa being:- Desmond Morris – *Manwatching, Bodywatching*; Julius Fast – *Body language*; and Alan Pease – *Body language: How to Read Others' Thoughts by their Gestures*. Their popularity may be related to distribution and the accessibility of materials. The work of Edward Hall, is more widely read in the USA than it is in South Africa, where it is not readily available and is virtually unheard of by the general public.²¹

What is distributed may also be 'read' in relation to the ownership and control of the media. In South Africa, as is the case globally, the media are controlled by white middle-class businessmen, with headquarters in the western business centres of London and New York.²² The content of the popular works that they distribute focuses on the attainment of control in two spheres – that of Western capitalist business and that of sexual conquest. The content of these texts reveals a bias towards the aspirations of the white-middle classes: success in business and in bed. The patriarchal structure of society and of big business (Punter:285) is therefore reproduced in body language texts. Men may read them to attain power in business and in bed; women may read them to manipulate men sexually in order to attain some power indirectly.

These popular works have an immense appeal as they offer the private individual a key to interpreting the 'secrets' of those around them through the signs provided by the gestural, facial and postural movements or positions by means of which we communicate – both consciously and unconsciously. Body language has thus fal-

len within the scope of 'Pop-psychology'.

Inherent in the popular media presentation of body language, is the danger of stereotyping due to the time and image constraints of the media whether on television or in the popular press and magazines. Stereotypes are foreshortened codes which perform a communication function in allowing individuals to control their private knowledge of others. They can also be seen to develop as a function of social tension. In South Africa, as is the case elsewhere, there is a need to place such signs in their wider context of economic instability, and concomitant social relations of distrust.

Psychoanalytic simplifications

Johnson argues that one of the gaps that has to be bridged in 'reading' texts, is that between readers and texts. In order to overcome *simplifications* inherent in *psychoanalysis*, resulting once more from the application of simple models to the complex of human actions, we need to look at how individuals construct internal narratives, in order to 'secure some objective continuity in the flux of events and meanings'. This is how we struggle – individually or collectively – for some integrity or unity, for some *control* over our produced, fragmentary and contradictory selves (Punter, 300-1).

Body image is a term derived from psychological studies of how we view our bodies. In the first world, psychologists have studied body image in relation to disorders of compulsive control – compulsive physical fitness, anorexia nervosa and bulimia. These disorders have been linked to cultural phenomena. Ballet dancers and fashion models (Twiggy) as well as other prominent media figures, epitomise the physical ideal of western culture (L. M. Vincent, 1979). This is not just the at-

tainment of a visual image but also the ability to subvert the appetite or control the body in order to attain a desired goal (which would be the case with jockeys, dancers and models). The representation²³ of the controlled thin, female form via the media and particularly as an aspect of Fashion, has been linked to masculine domination of the media and the sub-ordination of women through their preoccupation with the attainment of a feminine ideal (French, 1985:448), this preoccupation with the thin controlled physical body is no longer an exclusively feminine concern: men too, feel pressured to attain this ideal physique.

The aforementioned compulsive disorders can be linked to power relations in terms of the individual's struggle for self-assertion and personal power in the face of social pressures which seem beyond individual control. They are found largely amongst pubescent white middle-class females, manifesting themselves precisely at the point at which they are struggling to attain a new adult understanding of their position as females within a *patriarchal* society.

Another resolution of this conflict between masculine and feminine is found in the adoption of an androgynous persona, by prominent teen-media figures, like David Bowie, Michael Jackson, Grace Jones and Annie Lennox.

An example of a less drastic attempt to modify body image, can be found via power dressing. The introduction and prevalence of shoulder pads in business suits can be viewed as an attempt by females to take on aspects of the masculine body image in order to compete for power and attention/respect in the male dominated business world (Speech by ex-Miss South Africa, M. Farrel to Secretary's Forum UND, 1992.). Similarly, the perception that aggressive behaviour may be a

'desirable' male characteristics could result from the conflation of aggression with assertiveness, derived from a perception of that male dominance results from male aggression. The denigration of the female form in the light of the patriarchal dominance of masculinity and male bodies is a focus of much feminist writing (French, 448-455 and Punter:238).

Some work on body image and power relations has been conducted within the feminist paradigm, in itself an interdisciplinary approach akin to that of cultural studies. This work has not been linked to that on body language as yet. Female emancipation in South Africa is an area which bears examining in this context. South Africa is an extremely conservative, very male dominated society.

Patriarchal control in South African terms has evinced certain peculiar manifestations. In traditional African society African men have a right to the control of the bodies of their wives. The understanding of women and children as the property of the male head of the family could offer an explanation for the particularly high incidence of rape and incest in South Africa. Amongst working class white Afrikaans males, an attitude of ownership of the bodies of wives and children, coupled with a sense of a loss of control in the current socio-economic context, may offer a partial explanation for the high incidence of family murders, in this demographic category. The incidence of rape and incest could be linked to an attempt by working-class males to overcome frustration arising out of their perceived socio-economic powerlessness.

In terms of Mead's definition of psychology (Morris, 1934:40), kinesics (body language in the context of group communication) forms part of the province of a psychology of social be-

haviourism. As body language also deals, on a sub- or un-conscious level, with the power relations experienced by the individual in society it can be seen that cultural studies provides a valuable extension beyond the confines of psychological theory.²⁴

Ideology, Culture and Ethnicity

In attempting to attain an overview of the interaction of social power relations and to provide what may be viewed as a completed circuit in terms of Johnson's model this paper will discuss *ideology, culture and ethnicity* and how they may impinge upon an understanding of body language.

The work of many semioticians, using psychoanalytic frames of reference, locates much of the encoding and decoding of body language in the individual's sub-conscious. This coding of body language is seen to be linked to the internalisation of cultural and social processes, and thus to the level of *ideology* (Volosinov:35). Body language, in this view, constitutes a code, developed from the internalisation of social mores. Body language can thus provide a mode of understanding the inter-relationship of individuals and their socio-cultural contexts. Understanding the constructedness of the mode/code can lead to improved communication skills and a release from an ideologically defined construct (Punter:295). If the form is not seen as a closed system, change is possible.

A demonstration of the congruence between studies of body language and the power relations in social situations is offered via proxemics (Edward Hall, 1955, 1966). This is a subcategory of body language defined as the study of the rules governing social distance – by which is meant the distance between various participants in different social situations and in different socio-cultural groupings. Proxemics clearly

links to the individual's internalisation of hegemonic controls and power relations in society.

The fundamental characteristic of South African society at present (akin to that of Eastern Europe) is instability and rapid social change. The basic concern of this line of enquiry is with what happens to ideological constructs in a period of rapid social change. An analogy can be drawn from somatic reaction to ideological understanding: In effect there seems to be firstly a retraction under stress, accompanied by a move towards conservatism in terms of ideology which is analogous to physical body movement. A human body will draw back from a stressful situation, in surprise or shock: The same retraction occurs in terms of social stress (Ivey, 1992). One reaction to the threat of unemployment is for the middle-classes to withdraw and to protect themselves, ideologically. This is why white Afrikaners formed their laager in the first place – they withdrew to consolidate their position in the face of the threat from the 'swart gevaar'²⁵ which threatened them via job competition and the perceived threat posed by British domination, to their cultural identity.²⁶ The re-emergence of Nazism and militant nationalism in Eastern Europe could in part be due to a similar response to a perceived loss of cultural identity in the face of European unity. What must also be remembered is that if a physical body cannot simply withdraw from a stressful situation that the next reaction is to lash out and fight. This is then the ideological reasoning behind the unleashing of violence by extremist groups (such as the CP and PAC in South Africa) when they perceive themselves to be under threat.

During periods of rapid social change, individuals may be unable to cope conceptually with the new social situ-

ation. As Dunn sees it, if "the culture is moving very fast ... High Technology + Conservative Ideology = Right Futurism. There are intimate links, for example, between increased nudity in public advertising, the efflorescence of dance studios, charity marathons and recycled *laissez-faire*. Their common factor is the body, their common concept is the possessive individualism of Locke, their common myth Narcissus. 'Around the body, which is entirely posited as the capital of divine right, the subject of private property is about to be restored.'" (Punter:87).²⁷ Previous work in the cultural studies has focused on dress as a factor that visibly unites and identifies youth sub-cultures in their struggle against hegemonic codes.

In terms of this paper 'culture' is not a static or even a necessarily coherent phenomenon: it is subject to change, fragmentation, reformulation. It is both adaptive, offering ways of coping and making sense, and strategic, capable of being mobilised for political, economic and social ends' (Tomaselli *et al.*, 1989:39).²⁸ Similarly in the view of this report concepts of 'race' and 'ethnicity' are constructs which people use to make sense of the human condition. In discussing perceptions of body language, the focus is placed upon visual classification and distinction, closely aligned to a conception of 'race', which is prefaced on a somatic, physical differentiation. The concept of 'ethnicity' extends to include language and culture as well as somatic factors. Thus the concept of ethnicity moves beyond the immediately visible to the realm of social relations. Both 'race' and 'ethnicity' are constructions in terms of which we arrive at an understanding of the relations between different groups.

In a South African context cultural identity was clearly linked to a definition of racial identity, based on somatic

description. This was institutionalised through the operationalisation of the ideological construct in the education, transport and legal systems amongst others.

There are two opposing notions operating here: that of the universal – which is applicable to all humankind, and that of the culturally or ethnically specific. Ethnologists began to search for a universal understanding through comparative studies, of the body language of man and animals on the one hand, and of gestures in inter-cultural contexts on the other. While certain aspects of body language are universally applicable it is more often the case that the universal patterns are overlaid by culturally codified adaptations of these underlying behaviours. This is a theory that is supported by the investigations of social behaviourists.²⁹ In the South African context this relation between universal and culturally codified behaviour can be demonstrated using an comparative example of contact behaviour in Zulu and Western traditions.³⁰ In terms of the Zulu tradition of Hlonipha,³¹ or respect, one demonstrates respect by averting one's gaze from that of a person of higher social status, and by squatting or lowering oneself in their presence. Conversely in Westernised society gazing directly at a superior on greeting demonstrates honesty and a willingness to communicate, and one stands to greet a superior out of respect. Thus gaze and changes in height are indicators of respect operating as indices of power relations which have been culturally codified. The specific codification may be related to the physical, material conditions that have framed spatial relations – namely to housing. To enter a traditional Zulu hut, one has to crouch down and it is not possible to stand inside them, crouching has subsequently been internalised in terms of Zulu social behaviour. Interestingly the

understanding that White housing allows the inhabitants to stand is encapsulated in the Zulu description of a white person as 'one who exits a room standing'.³²

Proxemics was discussed above as it related to the internalisation of hegemonic controls. Individuals relate to other individuals in terms of the rules of relation that have been developed within their 'particular' understanding of concrete 'lived' experience. An understanding of an individual's own identity is developed in relation to others either within one's own group or between one's own and other groups.³³ In order to make sense of the world we have to make these same/other distinctions. It is only through an understanding of our place in the power structure of society that we can define our modes of relation. Thus it is that the categories of age, class, race, and sex serve a 'real' purpose in the continuous construction of identity and relation, whether this is in terms of cultural relations, cultural products, power relations or the construction of a cultural or ethnic identity. Such constructions of social forms and relations are required by individuals and by societies to facilitate interaction within society. The only danger inherent in these constructs is that they become mythologised or reified once they have been constructed (Barthes, 1977:165). If people allow these constructs to have power over them and to control their relations in a closed circuit, they will effectively disempower themselves. It is possible to *conclude* that in order to avoid this danger people need to become aware of these constructs and in the blurb of the popular body language texts: 'learn to read the hidden codes in order to maximise their own potential'.³⁴

Culture, Body and Power

According to Johnson, there are three main forms of cultural studies re-

search. Production related studies which imply a struggle to control, transform or counter the more separated kinds of cultural production in society; text based approaches which focus on the nature of the cultural products themselves and research into lived cultures which has been closely associated with the politics of representation (Punter:303-4). In order to attain the most comprehensive possible understanding of these forms our readings must be as multi-layered as possible, identifying 'preferred readings' or 'dominant frameworks' as well as subordinated versions (Punter:305-6). Cultural forms must also be related to an analysis of social relations, so 'a form of cultural analysis, influenced by structuralist insights, is combined with a strong sense of everyday cultural productiveness' (Punter:307).

If body language studies are examined as aspects of a continuous process with many areas of overlap it is important to see that any 'reading' and reconstruction of body language must be conducted from an understanding of the moment in the cultural circuit, at which such a reading is made. As can be seen even from such a brief contextualisation, there are a large number of factors influencing power relations and body language in South Africa and that much could be gained from examining the links between body language and the cultural studies project.

One of the strongest arguments for the examination of the dynamics of body language is the explication of the various formalised rules of encoding and decoding gestures. Once it becomes apparent that the universal conditions underlying body language and many other cultural practices have been overlaid by culturally (hegemonically) determined practices, it might be possible to interact from a more critically aware perspective and thus be

less bound by such social practices and the power relations that order them than is currently the case. This is the major project to be undertaken from the combined perspectives of cultural studies and body language.

Footnotes

1. Namely: class & manifesto marxism; the culture problematic and the structuralism/humanism debate.
2. The understanding of language used is that of a codified system which is constantly changing and transforming. For an explication see Chomsky's understanding of generative grammar (1957).
3. Via Darwin's *Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872).
4. Rabinov, (ed) *The Foucault Reader*, 1984, p. 7.
5. *Ibid.* p. 40.
6. In this paper popular works refers to those works that have been published for 'mass' consumption. Authors would include Fast, Morris, Nierenberg & Calero and Pease, as well as many others with a 'mass appeal'. Such works include a large number of illustrations and are phrased in colloquial rather than academic jargon. By 'scientific works', the researcher refers to those that have been published and presented for academic consumption in terms of the 'scientific' paradigm (Galileo, Francis Bacon, Descartes, Newton). Authors would include the likes of Birdwhistell, Edward Hall and Mehrabian.
7. Efran's "Looking for approval: effects on visual behaviour of approbation from persons differing in importance", (1968) is an example of a scientific-academic work that avoids explicating the concept of power. Popular titles, such as Lyle's *Body language: Read the Hidden Codes and Maximise Your Potential* (1990) demonstrate a more overt approach to power.
8. The idea of knowledge as power can be traced to Francis Bacon (1561-1626) when he stated his belief that science could contribute to mankind's physical welfare by conferring power over nature in the following way: Knowledge and power meet in one, to establish and extend the power and dominion of the human race itself over the universe.
9. Marx deals with this disempowerment via the concept of alienation in *Marx – Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, pp. 66-73.
10. Titles of works on the flyleaf of Nierenberg and Calero (1973), include *Pyramid Power*, *Bring out the Magic in Your Mind*, *How to develop a Super Power Memory*, *In Search of the Healing Energy*, *Pendulum Power*, *How to Develop Your ESP*, *The ESP Workbook*, and *Maximise Your Mental Power*.
11. The link is made via semiotic analysis of subjects on film ranging from sitcom actors to politicians on the news (Atkinson, 1984) and through semiotics to the presentation of the actor (used in the generic sense) within the context of the scenario or environment.
12. *A Dictionary of Gestures*, Bauml & Bauml, 1975, provides an extreme example of an attempt to attribute precise meanings to particular gestures. Some highly codified movements, do signify specific meanings in certain instances, human behaviour may be influenced by so many factors aside from those which are immediately apparent, such as idiosyncratic habits. Therefore a rigid conception of, meanings without taking cognisance of contextual modifications, could be analytically disastrous.
13. Edward T. Hall, in an interview with Martha Davis for *Kinesis 1* (1978):10, comments on the fact that subsequent research has not taken up his work on Proxemics as a whole system but have taken 'little bits and pieces of it.' Which has meant that they 'are still left with fragments and a coherent system has been linearised. As soon as you linearize, of course, it goes off in one direction.'

14. Or across to the practically applied linguistics of M. A. K. Halliday, William Labov or Basil Bernstein. As a direct critique of Saussure, V. N. Volosinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, trans. L. Matekja and I. R. Titunik, Seminar Press, New York, 1973, esp. pp. 58-63.
15. Research in the field.
16. These are what Johnson defines as the major social relations involving power (Punter:284 and 301).
17. 'Media images and the literature on youth culture tend to show youth at their most active and most destructive. This has had the effect of reducing the entire spectrum of young people's experience to highly visible activities. There is a need to balance the picture by exposing the full range of activities in which youth participate, action as well as idleness and daydreaming; creativity as well as destruction. The media reports of the youth unrest conjure up images of the leaders of the mass movements, the judges of the kangaroo courts, the comrades running the street committees, the gangs of thugs which have closed the gaps created by the power vacuum since townships have become 'ungovernable'. Scant attention has been paid to the rank and file of youth who make up the majority' (Valerie Moller, 1991:6).
18. Here we have been dealing with a black/white issue in the interests of simplification. Such an encounter could also occur in the context of the same racial group, where gender and class differences are still a factor. There is also a simplification in that the division in South African society is not just between black and white.
19. The closest that Birdwhistell comes to an acknowledgement that power relations may be a factor influencing communication when he states that 'While we do not wish to become involved in status and role theory, we must note that the broadest cross referencing behaviour in the communication system relates directly to these aspects of interaction', 1970 p. 203.
20. In its simplest form this model treats of a sender, a medium and a receiver in all communication processes.
21. Research in the field.
22. The prominence of the West as a category for dividing the world may in itself derive from an internalisation of the writer's perspective on the Western side of the Cold War power bloc's.
23. The term 'representation' is used here in the same sense as Johnson uses 'publication' as a presentation in public form.
24. Volosinov, pp. 25-41.
25. Black peril/threat.
26. After their defeat in the Anglo-Boer War, the Afrikaners mobilised against the perceived threat to their heritage by the English language, this led ultimately to the formation of cultural and political movements.
27. Baudrillard, *Fetishism and Ideology*, quoted in Jonathan Miles, 'The Naked the Uniformed and the Dead', Z/G, No.7 (probably 1982).
28. This description was developed in reaction to the South African situation. In South Africa ideological mobilisation, via cultural identity, has been used by interest groups in the pro and anti-apartheid movements, as well as within ethnic minorities.
29. Birdwhistell, 1973. See also the work of Eibel-Eibesfeldt, particularly his 1971 paper *Transcultural Patterns of Ritualised Contact Behaviour*, in *Behaviour and Environment: the use of Space by Animals and Men*, edited by A.H. Esser, Plenum Publishing, New York. pp. 238-246.; and the writings of Edward Hall.
30. Both categories of 'Zulu' and 'Western' culture and traditions are constantly transforming. Urbanisation is a major factor in the process of transformation. For an overview of rural-urban linkages in South Africa see Bekker, S. and Clark, C. (1989): 'Introduction' and 'Conclusion' in *Reality: a Journal of Liberal and Radical Opinion*, Volume 22, Nos 1 & 2.

31. Krige, 1965, pp. 30-31.
32. Research in the field. The Zulu word that expresses this concept is 'Phumalimi'.
33. For some discussion on ingroup and outgroup distinctions see Bochner, S. (ed.) 1982 *Cultures in Contact: Studies in Cross-cultural Interaction*, Pergamon Press, Oxford. pp. 11-15.
34. Taken from Jane Lyle's title.

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