



From Cultural Difference to Horizons of the Same: Review of Marshall Sahlins Culture in Practice and Bruce Mau Massive Change

Anne-Marie Willis

To cite this article: Anne-Marie Willis (2006) From Cultural Difference to Horizons of the Same: Review of Marshall Sahlins Culture in Practice and Bruce Mau Massive Change, Design Philosophy Papers, 4:1, 53-61

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2752/144871306X13966268131398>



Published online: 29 Apr 2015.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 8



View related articles [↗](#)

From Cultural Difference to Horizons of the Same

Review of Marshall Sahlins
Culture in Practice and Bruce
Mau *Massive Change*

Anne-Marie Willis

This essay presents reviews of *Culture in Practice: Selected Essays* by Marshall Sahlins (Zone Books, New York, 2005, distributed by MIT Press, 646 pages), and *Massive Change* by Bruce Mau and the Institute without Boundaries (Phaidon, London, 2004, distributed by Bookwise International, 240 pages).

Why would a book of essays by an anthropologist, some written over thirty years ago, be relevant to designers or people thinking about design today?

The more general answer to this question is that anthropology is relevant to thinking design because of its insights into material culture. While anthropology, as “the study of man” (sic) initially focused on pre-modern, tribal peoples, it soon enlarged into a wider enquiry into the nature of the human, the social and culture; and it developed a range of competing theories about these categories

and their inter-relationships. The line of separation between ‘us’ and ‘them’ or between the investigator and their object of study became increasingly muddled – and it now seems that anthropology is more of a meditation on the nature of the anthropologist’s own society than the societies studied. For Marshall Sahlins, this is self-consciously so.

Questions of material culture and of specific cultural practices are central in Sahlins schema, though ‘design’ as such glides by him, coming tantalisingly close in a few instances.

The fact that Sahlins and fellow anthropologists do not directly address design has not prevented designers, design researchers and the commercial world more generally from raiding anthropology for instrumental purposes. Anthropological and ethnographic methods and theory have been deployed in areas like consumer research, user-centred design, product semantics and ‘emotion and design’. Microsoft has taken this a step further by employing a team of eight of its own anthropologists who work ‘in the field’ probing the cultures of user groups around the world, feeding their findings into product development and marketing. Many anthropologists have studied contemporary market society (an early example is Douglas and Isherwood’s *World of Goods*), thus producing research amenable to instrumental take-up.

Knowledge produced by anthropologists has not only been used to understand contemporary society, in fact it has helped shape it. This is seen most strikingly in the career of W. Lloyd Warner who began his career as an anthropologist in the 1920s working amongst Aboriginal tribes of Northern Australia. Following this and employing the same ‘participant observation’ methods, he headed up a large team of field researchers who lived amongst communities over extended periods of time observing the dynamics of social class in America. This research (known as the ‘Yankee city’ project) formed the basis of Warner’s definitive study, *Social Class in America* (1948) which divided the US population into six classes, defined, not as economists did, according to income, but, according to material culture, aka consumption patterns. His book came to be regarded as a definitive work and was widely used in market research and by marketers. By the 1950s Warner had become directly involved in consumer research as a consultant to one of the major ‘motivational research’ companies, and he even featured as a seminal figure in Vance Packard’s classic dissection of American marketing and advertising, *The Hidden Persuaders* (1957).

Sahlins, on the other hand, has never been interested in using anthropology to oil the wheels of commerce. Instead, he subjects taken-for-granted aspects of western society to a productively estranging gaze (a perspective clearly lost across the career trajectory of Warner).

The essays selected for *Culture in Practice* deal with western society’s myths about itself and the nature of interactions

between Western and non-Western cultures. Some essays deal with historical events in Melanesia and Polynesia, but in none of these does Sahlins presume to speak on behalf of other cultures. What he presents, most often, are multi-layered interpretations of interpretations, as he seeks to identify the dynamics underlying often ill-fated encounters between radically different cultures and worldviews.

Sahlins interrogates the obvious. Why do contemporary Americans eat such a small range of animals (mainly cattle and pigs) and designate others of equal nutritional value such as dogs and horses as taboo? And what governs the logic of the preferred parts – flesh over innards – again not nutritional value and certainly not rarity (there is much more flesh on a beast than there is heart, liver, etc)? Rational explanations break down, and according to Sahlins, we are left only with a totemic logic whereby certain kinds of meat (and food more generally) have certain meanings and are eaten by people of certain status. (174–5) Unlike French anthropologist, Claude Levi-Strauss, who believed totemism had diminished to a few occasional practices in western society, Sahlins asserts that it has mutated into something far more powerful and elaborate, no longer articulated only via differences amongst natural species but by differentiation amongst a vast array of manufactured objects.

Sahlins stresses the importance of “the social significance of concrete contrasts among products” adding:

it is by their meaningful differences from other goods that objects are rendered exchangeable: they thus become use values to certain persons, who are correspondingly differentiated from other subjects. At the same time, as a modular construction of concrete elements combined by human invention, manufactured goods uniquely lend themselves to this type of discourse. (175)

Manufactured objects are particularly suited to the proliferation of difference “... in manufactured objects many differences can be varied at once, and by godlike manipulation – and the greater the technical control, the more precise and diversified their manipulation.” Though he doesn’t mention design, clearly such a statement places design in a pivotal position in the production of meaning and value in contemporary market-based societies. It is perhaps telling that his throw-away expression “by godlike manipulation” unwittingly echoes Vilem Flusser’s evocation of the ‘divine’ power of designers”.¹

Sahlins makes these observations in an essay titled ‘La Pensee Bourgeoise: Western Society as Culture’, which is a play on Claude Levi-Strauss’s classic work *La Pensee Sauvage* (english edition: *The Savage Mind*). Originally published in 1976 this essay also marks Sahlins take-up of Jean Baudrillard’s analysis of contemporary

capitalism, whom he quotes using his own translations of passages from *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*.

Sahlins inverts the notion of the primitive as exotic, referring to “bourgeois totemism” as “potentially more elaborate than any ‘wild’ (sauvage) variety” (176) and in a later essay remarks ironically that “the market economy, by harnessing an absolute sense of rationality to a relative logic of signs, ushers in a (truly) golden age of symbolic freedom”. (485)

Whether Sahlins has got it absolutely right is not really the point here. Whether you agree with his characterisation of market society or not, what he offers is a very useful distancing. He makes the familiar strange. He has the ability to make the habitual and mundane appear bizarre and arbitrary.

Sahlins invocation of “bourgeois totemism” is part of his larger campaign against utilitarian thinking because it “ignores the cultural code ... governing utility” (164). This is to say that explanations based on an assumption of ‘economic rationality’ can tell us nothing about why certain goods or services have acquired symbolic value for certain people at certain places and times and have been part of defining who they are, i.e., socially positioning them. Yes, people in the capitalist economy choose how they will spend their money and seek to maximise ‘value for money’. But says Sahlins:

the symbolic values thus realised through (such) pecuniary economising do not in themselves constitute a scheme of material optimisation – whether of energy, calories, protein, population size, resource use, or any sort of natural-selective advantage. (40)

Indeed, and this is what is scary. The so-called rationality of the marketplace (and we all know that today ‘the economy rules’) is a chimera erected on a marshmallow foundation of totally arbitrary and constantly shifting whims. There is no underlying logic of common good nor even of commonsense, and there is certainly no mechanism of sustainment in place to ensure futures. The global failure to take decisive, large-scale action in response to mounting, and now, increasingly everyday-experienced, evidence of human-induced climate change, is proof enough of this absence.

As well as offering a cultural reading of so-called economic behaviour (or, more accurately, within the what Bataille designated as the *restricted economy*) Sahlins is significant for the thinking of sustainment in several other ways. First, he relentlessly undermines the common-sense of economic thinking. Likewise, and linked to this, he challenges vulgar rationality as an explanation of human behaviour. Third, he is a perceptive interpreter of the symbolic richness of material culture; and fourth, he is concerned with the questions of change and agency.

One of Sahlins' best known essays, *The Original Affluent Society* (1972) is included in this collection. Here, he turns on its head the idea that hunter-gatherers led lives dogged by scarcity and had to make enormous efforts to feed themselves. Many anthropologists and early European observers of African bushmen, Australian aboriginals and South American indians, related that only a few hours a day was spent in obtaining food. They also consistently remarked upon the abundance of food and the relatively leisurely lives of hunter-gatherers. Some admired this, others condemned it as idleness. The oft-remarked upon 'laziness of the natives' is understandable, says Sahlins, by their "trust in the abundance of nature's resources rather than (the European tendency to) despair at the inadequacy of human means". (123)

Likewise, the minimal material goods of hunter-gatherer societies has generally been taken as a sign of their poverty. Sahlins sees this instead as indicating how hunter-gatherers value freedom of movement – too many goods would tie them down. Interestingly, it is Lloyd Warner's observations of the Murngin people of northern Australia that Sahlins draws on here, thus taking Warner's analysis of material culture in completely the opposite direction that Warner himself ultimately took it. For Sahlins concludes that generally, hunter-gatherer societies are not poor, but affluent, and, most significantly that their affluence is born of reduced needs. How different this is to market societies in which people work ceaselessly towards attempting to satisfy ever-expanding domains of posited 'needs' and where the so-called rule of scarcity is the economist's maxim ("the famous allocation of scarce means among alternative ends to obtain the greatest possible satisfaction.") (164)

While Sahlins would no doubt agree with the proposition that western societies should reduce their consumption of resources, he is too astute an observer of people and cultures to appeal to some set of universal, base needs. For Sahlins (and other anthropologists he cites such as Clifford Geertz), it is not as if humans have base biological needs that then get overlaid with specific cultural forms and norms, but rather that the biological is only ever experienced culturally. Thus food and shelter are always particular kinds of food and shelter. The abstract categories arrive after the fact, and while in western thinking such categories have tried to be foundational, they can never not be cultural. He notes that people don't produce 'housing' or 'shelter' but dwellings of a definite sort – a peasant's hut or nobleman's castle:

"... a particular type of house as a particular type of home, represents a continuous process of social life in which men reciprocally define objects in terms of themselves and themselves in terms of objects". (166)

Thus through material production and the use of material things, people make themselves as particular kinds of people – yet

another statement of that hermeneutic circling of the designing of the designed.

Sahlins' relentless unravelling of western values – rationality, utilitarianism, positivism, functionalism, economism, the rule of pleasure and pain – are far more rich and complex than I can indicate here.

The final essay, 'The Sadness of Sweetness' is an impressive historical sweep that exposes a tragic core at the heart of western ideas of happiness. Also fascinating is 'Cosmologies of Capitalism' in which Sahlins tells how the gradual permeation of tea-drinking through all levels of English society drove a complex pattern of trade that inducted Pacific island cultures into supplying goods that the British could trade with China. This "global market in human frailties" had world-shaping consequences and the British desire for "all the tea in china" is shown to be no less irrational than the Chinese pursuit of sandalwood to burn on altars. (421)

For Sahlins, the indigenous peoples of the Pacific islands, Asia and America who were drawn into this circle of trade, were not helpless victims. Their tendency to endow Western goods – and sometimes people – with divine powers or magical properties, wasn't sheer simple-mindedness, but rather an instance of their "struggle to integrate their experience of the world system (aka capitalism) into something that is logically and ontologically more inclusive: their own system of the world". (417)

Asserting as a basic principle that one can only ever make sense of other cultures according to one's own cultural categories, Sahlins' narrative is one that tries to make sense of indigenous peoples appropriation of western things for their own purposes, in fact, in order to strengthen their own culture, "harnessing industrial technologies for paleolithic purposes" (508). Thus eskimos have accumulated snowsleds to support their hunting and "subsistence airplanes" are used to extend the hunting range to areas where caribou are located and to provide on demand transport for visiting relatives in nearby villages (518). And in Hudson Bay, western blankets became a form of currency, a measure of the symbolic 'destruction', 'wastage' and giving away of goods that accrued status to the giver, having the advantage of western manufactured sameness of form (unlike animal skins) thus serving the purpose of being able to quantify the extravagant giving of these potlaches. (448–53)

The question of cultural continuity and change recurs for Sahlins, and in the just-discussed example, he sees the actions of Pacific islanders and Hudson Bay indians not as attempts to conserve traditional cultures in the face of external change, but rather as forms of 'neo-traditional development' in which groups within those cultures sought to increase their status, influence and prosperity by appropriating western goods within their own terms of reference.

This links to other questions Sahlins pursues, such as whether culture overdetermines individuals (explored, for example, in the 1982 essay, 'Individual Experience and Cultural Order'). He rejected the view of his teacher Leslie White that people are simply programmed by their cultures, preferring instead Sartre's notion of the universal particular. One of the ways he considers what he characterises and "the relationship between culture and agency, structure and event", is through an analysis of events of social change in which he himself participated, centring on opposition to the Vietnam War. He describes the fortuitous genesis of the idea of the anti-war 'teach-in', which was initiated by a small group of academics at the University of Michigan in 1965 as an alternative, in fact as the opposite, to the more conventional form of protest, a strike. Rather than withdraw their labour, the academics multiplied it, occupying the campus all night to teach against the war. The idea caught on and very rapidly teach-ins were being held across the nation, exponentially multiplying the numbers of staff and students opposing the war, culminating in a national teach-in held in Washington with massive media coverage. For Sahlins the teach-in was "an idea whose time had come" but as a specific cultural form "it was not 'determined' by general political forces in opposition to the war. It was sufficient to have an effect on the larger system, but not a necessary outcome of it." He speculates perhaps all of culture is like this – i.e., "composed of practices whose reasons are sufficient to their existence but never necessary". (27)

Sahlins sees these events demonstrating "that historical agency is a relationship to the cultural order: an embodiment of collective powers in individual persons ... effected by the situational felicity of an action". (25)

As indicated in the introduction, there is a long tradition of the instrumental appropriation of anthropology, not least by designers and the commercial world more generally. What Sahlins has to offer goes in the opposite direction, which is why he is relevant. This, because designers and design researchers need to have a relation to anthropology based on *learning from it* rather than than co-opting it into service.

So, if you're looking for a book that can help you think about: culture in general; material culture in particular; questions of cultural difference and cultural exchange; the relationships between economy and culture, or between individual action and social structure, or between belief systems and ways of life – then Marshall Sahlins *Culture in Practice* is thoroughly recommended.

"Massive Change is not about the world of design; it's about the design of the world." Back cover blurb, Bruce Mau et al *Massive Change*

What links these two publications? I'm tempted to say, "only the fact that Bruce Mau designed the cover of Marshall Sahlins' book."

In some ways, it's not fair to compare them – they're different projects, aimed at different readerships. But what does make it valid to compare them is the fact that both are about culture as well as attempting to be cultural interventions.

Where *Culture in Practice* is quiet and reflective, the distillation of one person's thinking over nearly a lifetime, *Massive Change* is a cacaphony of voices, images and typography. Where Sahlins presents an invitation to careful thought, Mau et al seek "wow!" and "gee-wiz" responses. Where some effort is required to enter into Sahlins' world of thinking, *Massive Change* is an object to be consumed.

Massive Change was a collaborative exhibition (commissioned by Vancouver Art Gallery) and a book produced, according to the long list of credits, by a cast of hundreds, under the direction of print/exhibition/branding designer Bruce Mau. The book is compiled rather than written, comprising of interviews, slab quotes, masses of imagery and lots of headings in massive point sizes.

Its single, most redeeming feature is that it seeks to foreground the importance of design. In a few succinct statements and a series of dramatic images that open the book, the case for 'the world as designed' is convincingly established. Allied to this, is a sense of the uncontainability of design. So instead of organising the book and exhibition according to traditional design disciplines (architecture, industrial, graphic, etc) eleven "design economies" are named and explored. These include the expected: energy economies, movement economies, information economies, material economies, but also those not conventionally associated with design, such as 'market economies', 'living economies' and 'wealth and politics'.

The benefit of this approach is that it allows design to be made visible in contexts where it would otherwise not be recognised (e.g., under the heading of 'Living Economies' are the predictable pieces on biotechnology and designer genes, but also on the institutional redesign needed to deliver access to safe drinking water to the thirty percent of the world's population that currently don't have it). The downside is that each 'economy' is dealt with very cursorily and the relationships between them are neglected. The logic governing the way in which the categories are explored is extremely limited – the focus is unrelentingly on innovation (often just novelty) and 'good news' while the mode of exploration is only via interviews and 'inspirational' declarations of a few hundred words framed by lead-in statements, most of which are either warmed-up modernist utopianism or just plain half-baked: "we will eradicate poverty"; "we will create urban shelter for the entire world population" "we will build a global mind"; "we will build intelligence into materials and liberate form from matter".

All of these are elaborations on the opening statement – “Now that we can do anything, what will we do?” – an end-of-history declaration if ever there was one! The “we”, it seems, is a techno-elite *a la* Buckminster Fuller (who is enthusiastically quoted in the introduction). The ‘others’ no doubt are grateful suffering masses!

Massive Change is about as uncritical as a primary school textbook. Its drive to be inspirational and optimistic squeezes out all possibility of critical perspective, save a few minor qualifications here and there. We’re told only the good stories about McDonalds, Walmart and other controversial global corporations. The faith in science and technology is boundless. Global problems are evoked – pollution, poverty, war, global warming – the simple message being ‘we can solve these problems – just by design’. Yet many of those interviewed talk about the obstacles to massive (and small) change. Where is agency in all of this? It’s a question that’s never directly addressed.

Really important issues float by like so much flotsam and jetsam bobbing up and down on a multi-coloured oil slick of ink that laps around a pier constructed from giant letters. Comment on the book’s design is unavoidable, given it’s so in-your-face. The layout is somewhere between a magazine and a textbook. Every two or three pages, a half page is dedicated to an enlarged quote; between a half and one third of the book is comprised of images. All of this hinders sustained reading, inviting just flicking through. Amazing facts and spectacular images pile one on top of the other, each obliterating what went before, inducing an amnesic state of perpetual presence. Everything becomes equivalent: one factoid on brain physiology = a statistic on oil consumption = a description of world shortage of fresh water = the benefits of a featherless chicken for hot climates (no irony intended here by the authors). The design of *Massive Change* undermines the case for the importance of design it wishes to put – as it presents readers with limitless horizons of the same.

Note

1. “... he [the designer] can give orders to a robot to translate into the here and now that which is perceived and manipulated in the eternal (for example, to dig canals or build rockets). In Mesopotamia, he was called a prophet. He is more deserving of the name of God. But thank God he is unaware of this and sees himself as a technician or artist. May God preserve him in this belief.” Vilém Flusser ‘The Designer’s Way of Seeing’ in *The Shape of Things: A Philosophy of Design* London: Reaktion Books, 1999, p. 42.