

## Chapter Four: Language, Film, Television and Advertising

### Structuring Meaning

Discussing Williams's view of meaning and its structures presents particular difficulties. Whereas, in relation to his thoughts about feeling, discussion of his contemporaries and immediate predecessors is profitable, in relation to meaning the benefits of such an approach are less obvious. This is because of the manner in which Williams worked in isolation from many of the intellectual trends in linguistics and semiotics that interested his contemporaries.

Williams's struggle to discern particular structures of meaning commenced during his final year as an undergraduate at Cambridge and continued with the onset of his professional life as a teacher and writer.<sup>1</sup> His concern was semantic and owed nothing to the *Course in general linguistics* (Saussure 1916), to *Structural Anthropology* (Levi-Strauss 1958) or to any work on *Mythologies* (Barthes 1957).<sup>2</sup> His interest in structures of meaning arose in a somewhat haphazard way during ruminations on the words culture, class, art, industry and democracy. He felt that these five words constituted a structure:

I could feel these five words as a kind of structure. The relations between them became more complex the more I considered them. I began reading widely, to try to see more clearly what each was about. Then one day in the basement of the Public Library at Seaford, where we had gone to live, I looked up *culture*, almost casually, in one of the thirteen volumes of what we now usually call the OED: the *Oxford New English Dictionary on Historical Principles*. It was like a shock of recognition. The changes of sense I had been trying to understand had begun in English, it seemed, in the early nineteenth cen-

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<sup>1</sup> For an account of this struggle see the Introduction to the second edition of *Keywords* published in 1983 (1976a: 11-26).

<sup>2</sup> See Michael Moriarty's valuable essay "'The Longest Journey": Raymond Williams and French Theory' (Moriarty 1992: 91-116).

ture. The connections I had sensed with *class* and *art*, with *industry* and *democracy*, took on, in the language, not only an intellectual but an historical shape. I see these changes today in much more complex ways. *Culture* itself has now a different though related history. But this was the moment at which an inquiry which had begun in trying to understand several urgent contemporary problems — problems quite literally of understanding my immediate world — achieved a particular shape in trying to understand a tradition. This was the work which, completed in 1956, became my book *Culture and Society*.

(1976a: 13)

Indeed he opened the Introduction of *Culture and Society* with a discussion of these words and their acquisition of new and important meanings (1958a: xiii).

In taking this step Williams was drawing upon a venerable tradition, not simply one springing from those working on the *OED*, but from an interest in signification and the use and abuse of words stretching back at least to the last third of the seventeenth century.<sup>3</sup> However, by embarking on his sort of historical philology, Williams was developing a novel if not an entirely unique approach. At any rate it was one that led to the attempt to map, historically, changes of the meanings borne by particular words and to assess the significance of these changed meanings. It was the controlling idea in the writing of *Culture and Society* and led to the eventual publication of *Keywords* in 1976.<sup>4</sup>

Williams did not think that he could understand particular words in isolation from their cognates or from words that signified associated practices, relationships and meanings, nor did he recognise any opposition between semantics, formal analysis, and historical study. Some years before he encountered structuralism he was able to develop an outlook in which an historical unity was posited between words and their developing meanings in

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<sup>3</sup> See Book III of John Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. See particularly 'Of the Imperfection of Words' (Locke 1690: 424-436) and 'Of the Abuse of Words' (Locke 1690: 437-452)

<sup>4</sup> See Williams's account of this matter in *Politics and Letters* (1979b: 175-6).

social practice. He thought that only an approach that employed all of these strategies in a unified manner could result in a satisfactory engagement of meaning in the flux of semantic and social development.

The significance that Williams discerned in particular words and their changing meanings was always social. Their history was always a social history, a history of the changing practices and relationships that they had come to denote. They could not be isolated from their social activity in communication; he thought of communication as having a lively dialectical relationship with the social production of meanings. Lynn Spigel, in her critical essay of 1992, explained his view of the relationship between language and communication thus:

For Williams, the materiality of language was a bridge to thinking about social change. Indeed, because he believed that communication is not simply determined by other, more basic, political and economic forces, but is part of the more general historical process, he also argued that media can be used to implement positive social change. It all depends on how we imagine using technologies and how our institutions give shape to this social imagination. For, at a fundamental level, the cultural form and function of communications media are determined by decisions of particular social groups in specific historical situations.

(Spigel 1992: xiv-xv)

Spigel goes on to criticise Williams's failure to engage explicitly with Leo Marx, Lewis Mumford or Harold Innis. However her description of his view of the role of communications as constitutive of social reality is persuasive. Williams explained his position in his book *Communications* in the following manner:

My own view is that we have been wrong in taking communication as secondary. Many people seem to assume as a matter of course that there is, first, reality, and then, second, communications about it . . . . We need to say what many of us know in experience: that the life of man, and the business of society, cannot be confined to these ends; that the struggle to learn, to describe, to

understand, to educate, is a central and necessary part of our humanity. This struggle is not begun, at second hand, after reality has occurred. It is, in itself, a major way in which reality is continually formed and changed. What we call society is not only a network of political and economic arrangements, but also a process of learning and communication.

(1962: 19)

Consequently, in the beginning there was *not* the Word. Williams refused such a beginning. For him the Word could not be said to precede all other activities. He thought of words and language as an indissoluble element of human self-creation. And, he feared that to say that language was merely ‘constitutive’ of humanity contained the danger of the reductionism employed by idealists and positivists alike:

The idea of language as constitutive is always in danger of this kind of reduction. Not only, however, in the direction of the isolated creative word, which becomes idealism, but also as actually happened, in objectivist materialism and positivism, where ‘the world’ or ‘reality’ or ‘social reality’ is categorically projected as the pre-existent formation to which language is simply a response.

(1977a: 29)

In adopting this stance Williams was responding directly to the tradition that thought of language as in some sense prior to human meanings and activity and to those in the Marxist tradition that tended to understand human thought and activity as a response or reflection of material reality. He was also, with the publication of *Marxism and Literature* in 1977, responding directly to the challenges posed by structuralism.

While acknowledging the ‘exceptionally productive’ and striking practical results of structural linguistics he was keen to associate what he called ‘the reified understanding of language’ expressed in the work of Saussure with the orthodox Marxism of Plekhanov and Stalin and with those acting under the influence of Althusser. To be sure, the concept of language as a formal system had opened the way to the achievement of a useful body of

linguistic studies, but it was apparently an achievement that threatened the proper social understanding of language to which properly constituted historical study gave access:

This achievement has an ironic relation with Marxism. On the one hand it repeats an important and often dominant tendency within Marxism itself, over a range from the comparative analysis and classification of stages of society, through the discovery of certain fundamental laws of change within these systematic stages, to the assertion of a controlling 'social' system which is *a priori* inaccessible to 'individual' acts of will and intelligence. This apparent affinity explains the attempted synthesis of Marxism and structural linguistics which has been so influential a phenomenon of the mid-twentieth century. But Marxists have then to notice, first, that history, in its most specific, active, and connecting senses, has disappeared (in one tendency has been theoretically excluded) from this account of so central a social activity as language; and second, that the categories in which this version of system has been developed are the familiar bourgeois categories in which an abstract separation and distinction between the 'individual' and the 'social' have become so habitual that they are taken as 'natural' starting points.

(1977a: 28)

In this way Williams deftly associated structural linguistics with the tendencies and errors of both Plekhanovite and Althusserian Marxism, and the bourgeois opposition of the 'individual' to the 'social' and the 'social' to the 'natural'.<sup>5</sup>

Against what he thought of as closed formal systems which gave credence to closed ideas of 'individual consciousness' or 'inner psyche' Williams counterposed language as activity and practical consciousness engaged in the social production of meaning (1977a: 36). He used the work of Vološinov (1930) to posit an alternative Marxist position in which the relation within

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<sup>5</sup> For Williams modernist literature, theoretical linguistics and structuralist Marxism could also be united in the ice-cold and estranging general assumption 'that the systems of human signs are generated within the systems themselves' (1983g: 223).

the linguistic sign between its formal element and its meaning was, although conventional, neither arbitrary nor fixed:

On the contrary the fusion of formal element and meaning . . . is the result of a real process of social development, in the actual activities of speech and in the continuing development of a language. Indeed signs can exist only when this active social relationship is posited. The usable sign — the fusion of formal element and meaning — is a product of this continuing speech-activity between real individuals who are in some continuing social relationship. The ‘sign’ is in this sense their product, but not simply their past product, as in the reified accounts of an ‘always-given’ language system. The real communicative ‘products’ which are usable signs are, on the contrary, living evidence of a continuing social process, into which individuals are born and within which they are shaped, but to which they then also actively contribute, in a continuing process. This is at once their socialization and their individuation: the connected aspects of a single process which the alternative theories of ‘system’ and ‘expression’ had divided and dissociated. We then find not a reified ‘language’ and ‘society’ but an active *social language*.

(1977a: 37)

Similarly, in response to the perceived threat to his view of practical consciousness posed by Chomskyan deep structures of language formation Williams resorted to Vygotskii (1962) whose work on inner speech and consciousness was able to acknowledge both biological determinations and the socio-historical development of speech and intellect. Consequently, Williams quoted Vygotskii at length:

If we compare the early development of speech and of intellect — which, as we have seen, develop along separate lines both in animals and in very young children — with the development of inner speech and of verbal thought, we must conclude that the later stage is not a simple continuation of the earlier. *The nature of the development itself changes*, from biological to socio-

historical. Verbal thought is not an innate, natural form of behaviour but is determined by a historical-cultural process and has specific properties and laws that cannot be found in the natural forms of thought and speech. (*Thought and Language*, 51)

(1977a: 43)

In this manner and without publishing any detailed encounter or engagement with linguistic theory Williams was able to develop an adequate account of the relationship between his historical philology and the social production of meaning. Consequently, from the late sixties to the end of his career he was able to sustain his distinctive outlook without making any significant concessions to the widespread interest in radical academic circles in structuralism, linguistics, and semiotics. However, on occasions he could make *superficial* concessions to this range of interests. In the 1981 primer, *Culture*, Williams employed phraseology culled from structuralism and semiotics to describe his own view of society and social development — a view that owed nothing to the work of, Saussure, Levi-Strauss or Roland Barthes.<sup>6</sup>

Above all, Williams was concerned to ensure that no theory, Marxist or bourgeois, materialist or idealist, should be allowed to weaken, threaten, or to any degree undermine confidence in human agency; human self-creation was axiomatic to Williams's account of society.<sup>7</sup> It was the keystone that held socialist hope

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<sup>6</sup> See particularly, 'Organization', the last chapter of *Culture*, (1981a: 206-233). See also the manner in which Williams could situate his work in the heart of the semiotic enterprise: 'It was here, perhaps to our mutual surprise, that my work found new points of contact with certain work in more recent semiotics. There were still radical differences, especially in their reliance on structural linguistics and psychoanalysis, in particular forms; but I remember saying that a fully historical semiotics would be very much the same thing as cultural materialism, and I was glad to see certain tendencies in this direction, as distinct from some of the narrower structuralist displacements of history. I could see also that some of the simpler positions of early structural linguistics could be modified by new emphases on the social and historical production of signifying systems, as in Volosinov and the social formalists.' (1981c: 210)

<sup>7</sup> See Perry Anderson's polemic against E. P. Thompson, *Arguments Within English Marxism*, particularly Chapter 2, where he concludes 'Strangely, of two unbalanced sets of generalizations, Althusser's inclines better towards history, Thompson's towards politics. The classical equipoise of the founders of historical materialism Marx and Engels is some distance from both.'

and commitment in place and it saturated every aspect of Williams's work on communications and media.

### Thoughts on Film

Williams was interested in cinema and film from his undergraduate days<sup>8</sup> and this interest was to continue throughout his life. It was a concern that first took professional shape in the late forties and the early fifties when he considered the challenges presented by teaching film in adult education.<sup>9</sup> These were not merely technical and pedagogic problems but also difficulties presented by entrenched resistance to film studies: many people were hostile towards taking film seriously as a focus for criticism and educational work. His approach was bold and combative:

Film appreciation, as it is commonly understood, is certainly not a tutorial subject; but then I would add that the mere appreciation of literature or of painting or of music is not tutorial work either. But the cinema has overtones; for reformers and conservatives alike it is conventional shorthand for depravity and cultural decay. Many fear that if education touches it, the taint will be indelible. It is a pretty fear; but if adult education cannot handle and assess an institution which weekly serves the leisure of twenty-five million British adults, and which deals well or badly, but at least with great emotive power, with the values of man and society, then adult education deserves to fade. The case for film as a tutorial subject is, first, that it provides opportunities for criticism, and that criticism is a major educational discipline; and, second, that the study of the cinema as an institution is an inevitable part of our sociology.

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Williams opted, like Thompson, for politics in flight from what Anderson called 'the overpowering weight of structural necessity in history.' (Anderson 1980: 58)

<sup>8</sup> See Williams's reminiscences in *Politics and Letters* (1979b: 46; 232).

<sup>9</sup> This was despite seeing far fewer films in the period 1946 to 1960 than at any previous time because he was living in a small provincial town and teaching in the evenings (1979b: 232).

(1953b: 186)<sup>10</sup>

With this dual approach: criticism of film and the sociological study of cinema, Williams was making a distinction that he was to retain throughout his career.<sup>11</sup> It was a distinction that provided the clarity needed for the development of both adequate teaching methods and effective critical strategies. And, his specific focus was on the difficulties inherent in developing an effective method of criticising film and of teaching film criticism.

In 1950 he launched an experimental preparatory tutorial class in film for the Workers' Education Association branch at Battle.<sup>12</sup> The course focused on training students to describe accurately in their written work what they had seen in specially prepared clips (and later in complete films) and attempted to use this skill in critical attention and recording to enable students to move from discursive comment towards more disciplined forms of integrated criticism. At the end of this experiment, despite a positive assessment of the classes, Williams advised against a full three-year class in film giving as a reason his own need for more experience in this method of teaching film. In the event the Battle WEA tutorial group went on to a tutorial in drama and film in which two-thirds of the time was devoted to drama rather than film.

This focus on the relation of film criticism to drama was of continuing importance to the manner in which Williams approached the criticism of film. While he did not think that the skills of literary critics were simply transferable to film he did believe that insights gained from the study of drama were essential to an integrated understanding of film:

It is fatal to attempt to carry over the substance of literary criticism into an art which is, in its essentials, very different. If we ever succeed in formulating adequate principles of film criticism, we can be sure that they will

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<sup>10</sup> For a later discussion of Williams's teaching of film criticism in the University as distinct from Adult Education and his collaboration with Stephen Heath and Colin MacCabe on a course on *Police Fiction* see the interview 'Television and Teaching' (1979c: 203-215).

<sup>11</sup> See Williams's late essay 'Film History' where the analytical distinction between 'film' and 'cinema' indicated in 'Film as a Tutorial Subject' in the early fifties is reiterated at some length (1983e: 132-3).

<sup>12</sup> This account is based upon 'Film as a Tutorial Subject' (1953b).

be different from the principles of literary criticism. The film may increasingly draw on words, and in this aspect we have the experience of good dramatic criticism on which to draw. But the best and most distinctive achievement of the film is essentially visual, and here (although some dramatic work will be relevant) a new critical method is clearly required. I believe, incidentally, that if film criticism is to develop in adult education, it will be wrong to regard it as an annexe to the work of literature tutors. We shall need specialists, and a literary training will not always be the best preparation.

(1953b: 188-9)

So, integrated criticism and practical criticism were to form the basis of film studies, and experience from work on drama was to lie at the centre of the new enterprise. This was made explicit in 1954 in 'Film and the Dramatic Tradition' in *Preface to Film*:

I hold to the argument that film, in its main uses, is dramatic in terms of its elements of performance and imitation; and that it is capable of producing works in the categories of tragedy, comedy, farce, or in any of the new categories which the variations of dramatic history have produced. This is not of course to deny that film, as a particular dramatic medium, has its own conditions, and can employ, within them, a number of possible conventions.

(1954b: 15)<sup>13</sup>

Williams then proceeded to discuss conventions at length and introduced the figure *structure of feeling*: 'All changes in the methods of an art like the drama are related, essentially, to changes in man's radical structure of feeling. The recognition of this truth must be our control in any immediate discussion.' (1954b: 23) In this way, through an analysis which foregrounded the study of dramatic convention in an essay on film he brought drama, film and deep social analysis together. And, he was then able to consider in the role of the script/text/screenplay in the final

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<sup>13</sup> See also the discussion of *Preface to Film* by John Higgins (Higgins 1999: 32-5).

achievement of a piece of work. In a later discussion of *Preface to Film* he noted that:

It has been the complaint of dramatic authors for the last eighty years that they lose the results of their labour in the next stage of the production process; yet ironically what is lost — the text — survives, while what is achieved — the performance — does not. The real problem then is, how can you find a notation for writing, not simply dialogue, but a whole dramatic action? The idea of total form was designed to indicate that all the elements of a dramatic work should be under coherent control, rather than vagaries of the dissociated process typical of capitalist relations of production. The specific interest of film was that it held the technical promise of a total performance, while being as durable as a written text.

(1979b: 230)<sup>14</sup>

The *total form* and the potential of film for the delivery of *total performance* was as Williams explained a performance in which the ideal of a wholly conceived drama was achieved: ‘each of the elements being used — speech, music, movement, design — bears a controlled, necessary and direct relation, at the moment of expression, to any other that is then being used’ (1954b: 54). Williams’s interlocutors in 1979 alluded to this with some irony as a ‘Wagnerian’ synthesis, but he understood it as the integration of the artwork under the control of its author. He thought that in Greek or Elizabethan drama this control had been exercised through shared conventions ‘which controlled not just the writing of the dialogue but also the movement and grouping of actors on the stage’ (1979b: 231).

In modern conditions the author might be an individual, a collaborating group, or an ensemble company, but in each case

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<sup>14</sup> The *total form* referred to here is a phrase from 1979 that Williams substituted for the phrase *total expression* that he had employed in 1954 (1954b: 52; 54). His interlocutors in 1979 had objected to the term ‘expression’: ‘Historically, phrases like this have been associated with aesthetics that have very little to do with realism, given the subjectivist overtones of the term ‘expression’. They evoke rather the symbolist idea of synaesthesia or the *Gesamtkunstwerk* of Wagnerian opera. What did you intend by this notion?’ Williams immediately conceded that he should have spoken of *total form* (1979b: 229-230).

the objective should be to ensure that the performance was not compromised by a separation between the script written by the playwright and the production realised by the director, actors, choreographers, musicians, stage managers and lighting technicians. Williams thought that this separation could be overcome or minimised by forms of notation in which the author wrote directions for the realisation of each scene and movement, and he was attracted by the idea that a film director could do this by controlling every aspect of the finished performance.

This belief was illustrated in the 1968 edition of *Drama in Performance* where Williams included an analysis of Ingmar Bergman's 1957 picture *Wild Strawberries*. Williams was impressed by Bergman's publication of his screenplays and his public discussion of their relationship to the finished films. What Williams thought of as age old problems of the relationship between the conventions of acted speech and the consequent conventions of written speech were amenable to novel solutions during the process of making films:

What is different, here in film making, is the claim of the man who creates the original work to achieve detailed and continuous control over just these vital elements of performance. It appears as a film-making problem but as such it only concentrates certain recurring problems of writing for speaking. What is new is the maker's insistence on their direct solution, by a means available in the conditions of performance. A dramatist directing his own play would have this control, but for a performance which then disappears or at best is remembered or becomes traditional. The condition here in film making is one fixed production or performance, which is then indefinitely repeatable.

(1968e: 158)

This was Bergman's achievement. He was a dramatic author who by becoming his own director had achieved the unity of text and performance, and in so doing, had realised all the phases of the work of his own mind.

What is most striking about Williams in relation to film is that although he appears to be irretrievably ensnared in this question of the potential which film had for overcoming the difficulties

which arise between writing and performance, almost as an *idée fixe*, he also glimpsed that the achievement of *total performance* by the authors/directors of films might be influenced by the conditions in which the film is viewed by an audience. In an anticipation of his conception of *flow* he was able to observe that over and above the controlling fact of the camera and the exceptional integration of characters, scenes and sequences, the employment of close-ups and the nature of images, determined by the director, the process of ‘continuous performance’ was radically different from attendance at a stage performance.<sup>15</sup> The conditions in which people saw a picture or the way in which people chose to see a movie had a bearing on the nature of the achieved performance. This insight was radically developed during his work on television.

### Televisual Flow: One Night in Miami

**A**lthough Williams’s projects for making films foundered on lack of funds<sup>16</sup> he was able to participate in television in a more direct manner. He described his relationship to television production in 1987:

Before the end of the 1960s I had taken part in innumerable discussions, live and recorded. For some years the BBC used to send a car to take me from Cambridge and return me in the small hours. I went on location in Wales to film my play *Public Inquiry*. I attended as author the live transmission, still then practised “to

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<sup>15</sup> (1968e: 160) The phrase ‘continuous performance’ refers to the manner of film exhibition common in cinemas until the late seventies (and abandoned in a number of picture houses earlier) where a double bill of two feature films together with a short, advertisements and newsreel would play continuously throughout the afternoon and evening and picture goers might enter the auditorium at any time — often in the middle of a picture — and then watch the programme round until the point ‘I think this is where we came in’ was reached — the picture goer might then decide to watch the movie again or leave the cinema while the film was continuing to play on the screen.

<sup>16</sup> Williams was at first, disbelieving, and then appalled by Michael Orrom’s opinion that *Singing in the Rain* was a good example of ‘total expression’ and wanted to counterpose a scenario of his own based on a reworking of a Welsh legend. However, he conceded, not without humour (perhaps?) that it might not have been an overwhelming alternative to *Singing in the Rain* (1979b: 233).

give the immediacy of theatre”, of another play, *A Letter from the Country*. In the late Sixties I worked for many weeks with Nicholas Garnham on a personal documentary in the series *One Pair of Eyes*.

(1987a: ix)

From 1968 to 1972 he also wrote a regular television column for the BBC magazine *The Listener*. He had a more intimate understanding of the conditions of television production than that of film and some of his television writing concerned institutional developments, ownership and control, and were closely related to the analysis of the growth of ‘mass’ communications which he developed during the early fifties.<sup>17</sup> However, it was in relation to viewing that he was at his most insightful. Factors concerning the modern consumption of media that he had merely glimpsed in relation to film came out much more clearly when Williams set about closely analysing television viewing.

His study in March 1973 of the distribution of types of television programme revealed the weakness of the concept ‘distribution’ and the need for ‘the mobile concept of ‘flow’’ (1974a 1992: 72). The output of several television companies<sup>18</sup> was studied for a week with the use of conventional categories like ‘News and Public Affairs’, ‘Features and Documentaries’ and ‘Arts and Music’ and this work permitted some comparative conclusions to be drawn. However, the limitation of this kind of textual analysis of the schedules was immediately apparent. Williams thought the results necessarily abstract and static, and he directed attention to what he called the ‘particular television experience’ (1974a: 80). To grasp this he thought that the concept of *flow* was needed because the real programme that is offered by companies is a sequence or set of alternative sequences of discrete items whose particularity is submerged in the total television offering. Williams’s description of flow could be graphic:

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<sup>17</sup> See ‘Mass and Masses’ in the Conclusion of *Culture and Society* (1958a: 297-312), and the for the continuation of this work, see (1962: 91-103); (1973d: 24-9); (1974a: 3-37). Williams also participated with Tony Higgins and Paddy Whannel in the preparation of the evidence submitted by *New Left Review* to the Pilkington Committee on the Future of Broadcasting and Television (Coppard 1961: 33-48).

<sup>18</sup> BBC1 (London), BBC2 (London), IBA (Anglia: Norwich), KQED (Public Television: San Francisco), Channel 7 (ABC: San Francisco), (1974a: 72).

One night in Miami, still dazed from a week on an Atlantic liner, I began watching a film and at first had some difficulty in adjusting to a much greater frequency of commercial ‘breaks’. Yet this was a minor problem compared to what eventually happened. Two other films, which were due to be shown on the same channel on other nights, began to be inserted as trailers. A crime in San Francisco (the subject of the original film) began to operate in an extraordinary counterpoint not only with the deodorant and cereal commercials but with a romance in Paris and the eruption of a prehistoric monster who laid waste to New York. Moreover, this was sequence in a new sense. Even in commercial British television there is a visual signal — the residual sign of an interval — before and after the commercial sequences, and ‘programme’ trailers only occur between ‘programmes’. Here there was something quite different, since the transitions from film to commercial and from film A to films B and C were in effect unmarked. There is in any case enough similarity between certain kinds of films, and between several kinds of film and the ‘situation’ commercials which often consciously imitate them, to make a sequence of this kind a very difficult experience to interpret. I can still not be sure what I took from the whole flow. I believe I registered some incidents as happening in the wrong film, and some characters in the commercials as involved in the film episodes, in what came to seem — for all the occasional bizarre disparities — a single irresponsible flow of images and feelings.

(1974a: 85-6)

However, it is evident that this appreciation of strikingly new developments in the way in which the output of broadcasting could be viewed did not enable Williams to do much more than lament the confusion. Despite his sophisticated understanding of contemporary developments in broadcast, cable and satellite technology, and the range of interactive devices rapidly converging

into what we would now call the Internet,<sup>19</sup> he lacked the critical resources to integrate the *flow* into an adequate understanding of the spectacular maelstrom thrown up by modern media.

This difficulty was exacerbated or compounded by his focus upon fighting technological determinism. The rather blunt observation that: ‘communication technology, and specifically television, is at once an intention and an effect of a particular social order’ (1974a: 122), did not deal with how the intentions are related to the effects. It was an observation produced by the overwhelming desire to brand technological determinism as a mode of formalism and to kill both with a stone hurled at Marshall McLuhan. Going straight to what was for Williams the heart of the matter he noted:

If the effect of the medium is the same, whoever controls or uses it, and whatever apparent content he may try to insert, then we can forget ordinary political and cultural argument and let the technology run itself. It is hardly surprising that this conclusion has been welcomed by the ‘media-men’ of the existing institutions. It gives the gloss of avant-garde theory to the crudest versions of their existing interests and practices, and assigns all their critics to pre-electronic irrelevance. Thus what began as pure formalism, and as speculation on human essence, ends as operative social theory and practice, in the heartland of the most dominative and aggressive communications institutions in the world.

(1974a: 122)

Williams was, of course, not wrong about McLuhan’s formalism.<sup>20</sup> McLuhan thought that the computer in education would mean that:

As information movement speeds up, information levels rise in all areas of mind and society, and the result is that

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<sup>19</sup> For an account which demonstrates Williams’s excellent grasp of contemporary technical developments see *Television, Technology and Cultural Form* (1974a: 130-140)

<sup>20</sup> Roland Barthes had expressed the formalism of semiology thus: Semiology is a science of forms, since it studies significations apart from their content. (Barthes 1957: 111)

any subject of knowledge becomes substitutable for any other subject. That is to say, any and all curricula are obsolete with regard to subject matter. All that remains to study are the media themselves, *as forms*, as modes ever creating new assumptions and hence new objectives.

(McLuhan 1960: 181)

Despite this Williams had gone on record as saying that he regarded ‘McLuhan as one of the very few men capable of significant contribution to the problems of advanced communication theory’, and had described McLuhan’s ‘*The Gutenberg Galaxy* as a wholly indispensable book’ (1964c: 219). However, in direct response to a question concerning Williams’s extremely polite criticisms of *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, and without mentioning Williams by name, McLuhan’s response was sharp: ‘It is customary in conventional literary circles to feel uneasy about the status of the book and of literacy in our society. Macdonald and others, heaven knows, are nineteenth- not twentieth-century minds’ (McLuhan 1967: 318). Williams did not have a ‘nineteenth-century mind’, but he was incapable of engaging with McLuhan’s opinions in any way that might have been productive.

In McLuhan’s outlook Williams sensed the cancellation of human history in a purely idealist model of human development realised in some automatic and undirected sense in the evolution of a technology of prosthetic devices.<sup>21</sup> In contrast to this view he saw technology as radically flexible with the potential of meeting needs quite different from those who may have developed it:

In other words, while we have to reject technological determinism, in all its forms, we must be careful not to substitute for it the notion of a determined technology.

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<sup>21</sup> Concerning the necessary and fruitful relationship between history and formalism see *Morphology of the Folktale* (Propp 1927: 15; 23). Roland Barthes expressed a similar point of view thus:

Less terrorized by the spectre of ‘formalism’, historical criticism might have been less sterile; it would have understood that the specific study of forms does not in any way contradict the necessary principles of totality and History. On the contrary: the more a system is specifically defined in its forms, the more amenable it is to historical criticism. (Barthes 1957:112)

Technological determinism is an untenable notion because it substitutes for real social, political and economic intentions, either the random autonomy of invention or an abstract human essence. But the notion of a determined technology has a similar one-sided, one-way version of human process.

(1974a: 124)

Williams insisted that determination should not be regarded as a single force, but as a contested process in which relations of inheritance, ownership and control are engaged in a complex set of relationships in which other pressures are brought to bear, making the outcome of pressures and conflicts unpredictable. Despite the paternalism that characterised the British notion of 'public responsibility' in broadcasting, and the ideology of 'public freedom' canvassed by the capitalist owners of transmission in America, viewers and listeners were engaged in an irrepressible search for other sources of entertainment and information (1974a 1992: 126). This accounted for the warm welcome given to American culture by many British working-class people. It also explained the popularity among European youth of pirate broadcasters. But, the irony was that this 'free and easy', accessible culture was 'a planned operation by a distant and invisible authority — the American corporations' (1974a: 127).

In this way, Williams was able to present a complex and contested view of determinations and to focus on issues of ownership and control, which kept open the possibility, if not the prospect of a different trajectory for the development of television technology and television as a cultural form. Subsequently, he had to acknowledge that few of his hopes had come to pass:

I still watch television as often but it is ironic, looking back at the 1960s, to read myself defending television against the complaints of intellectuals all over Europe and North America. What I said then was possible, and in some cases actual, was true, but I have to face the fact that their descriptions of it are now, with only a few exceptions, remarkably accurate about current British television. Nevertheless, because of the way it went, what we have seen is not some essential and inevitable destiny of the medium. The true process is historical. The changes were

politically willed and managed. The exciting burst of new work in the Sixties was very consciously and deliberately restrained. (1987a: xi)

Williams's strategy of focusing upon ownership and control, despite the complexity of his account, did not enable him to employ his conception of flow as a dynamic way of grasping the nature and tempo of modern capitalist relations. His television criticism tended to rest upon the axioms of his political outlook rather than on any new insights provided by the actual development of communications technology and their related cultural forms.

### *Monty Python's Flying Circus*

Williams felt that the 'grotesque and exuberant fantasy' of *Monty Python's Flying Circus* was 'playing on strained nerves'; it provoked 'an inevitable and unstoppable laughter somewhere on the far side of a general breakdown of meanings' (1972d: 194). The 'achingly funny' mood created by *Monty Python's* disruption of the conventions of television news and current affairs presentation was in some sense a response to an ungovernable weariness at the problems of the world. And, it was this mood that mattered:

This, I believe, is the mood that matters. Television is now so pervasive that we project onto it many of our feelings about quite other things. Yet in its standard uses in this kind of society it is clearly part of the problem rather than part of the solution.

(1972d: 194)

*Monty Python* created a residual mood 'in which virtually nothing' could be 'said or done without becoming absurd'. This, Williams thought, had had a salutary effect (which was, to be sure, deserved) on most of the dominant programming. However, he said:

Perhaps I am too preoccupied with problems of sequence and flow on television, but I keep noticing a sense of

devastation of other kind of work and statement around this kind of comedy.

(1980d: 111)

Williams thought that the only reasonably constant factor in what had been dubbed 'satire' by Kenneth Tynan was 'a specific conjunction of university revue with popular television' (1980d: 108). *Monty Python*, coming as it did, from the 'dissident comic faction of the governing and administrative class' could point up the absurdity of the ruling circles because the Oxbridge boys responsible for the show were familiar with the world of the upper class. But, they had regrettably also failed to shed their negative attitudes to funny foreigners, funny regional accents, funny housewives, and funny workingmen. However, Williams did not think that 'there was any point in blaming the boys'. What mattered most was not the rudery and cruel jokes and joking cruelty, but finding ways of restoring the opportunities for *gravitas* destroyed by *Pythonesque* humour and the wild bursts of anarchic energy displayed by these upper class lads:

What is really in question is how we get through, get out of, a state of disbelief and helplessness which is bound, in all its early stages, to seem comic and edgy: demanding the funny face and the paranoiac prance.

(1980d: 112)

Williams did not seem to be aware that *Dud and Pete* and the *Dagenham Dialogues* were not simply amusing commentaries on 'the absurdity of the thinking working-class man' but could, in the general context of their humour, be thought of as assaults upon the conception of the working class as it was figured in the general class relations of the time. *Monty Python* could be read as an assault upon Britain in the seventies and the manner in which *all* classes were patterned and figured. But Williams saw it as decadent:

It is in some of *Monty Python*, and perhaps at its best in *The Life of Brian*, that this note of shared helplessness is most often struck. Somebody is trying to say something, or to think something through, and every kind of interruption and disability not only intrudes and prevents him,

but seems marshalled, systematically, to prevent him. At its best, this has much in common with the more officially recognised art of what is called ‘non-communication’. Indeed often, in its exuberance, it is less decadent than these more prestigious currencies of the official art and theatre world. But still, less *decadent*.

(1980d: 111)

This view of decadence<sup>22</sup> prevented Williams from grasping fully that what was decaying were the traditional ways in which class relations had been figured and organised in Britain since the 1880s. To be sure, he knew that the proliferation of ‘consumer durables’, that had begun as early as the mid-twenties, had been responsible for initiating profound changes to the way individuals experienced society.<sup>23</sup> He was aware that gradually widening prosperity and what he called *mobile privatisation* was altering the experience of ‘modern urban industrial living’ (1974a: 20). Yet he did not doubt the continued existence of the working-class as a readily identifiable economic, political and cultural entity. And, it was precisely the maintenance of this tension between changes that he knew were taking place and his commitment to a political outlook predicated on the view that such changes were epiphenomenal that prevented him, along with John Lennon and many others, from recognising the emergent notion that ‘class consciousness’ was under severe pressure if not actually outmoded.<sup>24</sup> Consequently, Williams could not properly acknowledge this important aspect of the emergent structure of feeling

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<sup>22</sup> See also ‘The Decadence Game’ (1970b: 118-121). For the cynical culture of late capitalism and the latent culture of alienation, see ‘Distance’ (1982c: 13-21).

<sup>23</sup> See *Television, Technology and Cultural Form* (1974a: 20).

<sup>24</sup> John Lennon’s song *Working Class Hero*, released December 11, 1970, expressed it thus:

Keep you doped with religion, sex and T.V.  
 And you think you're so clever and classless and free  
 But you're still fucking peasants as far as I can see  
 Working Class Hero is something to be  
 Working Class Hero is something to be

*Plastic Ono Band*: Produced by John Lennon, Yoko Ono,  
 Phil Spector.

revealed by the formal innovation and changes in comic conventions initiated by *The Goon Show*, *Beyond The Fringe*, *TW3*, and *Monty Python's Flying Circus*. He could not, of course, easily endorse the idea that class distinctions were ludicrous, or take the view that the intersecting dignities associated with rank, were simply absurd.

### Advertising: The Hidden Persuaders<sup>25</sup>

Williams understood advertising as an essentially parasitic practice battenning upon the production and distribution of goods.<sup>26</sup> He attributed its growth to the growth of monopolies and their need to organise the market to their own advantage. In this sense advertising was simply a device of capitalists to cajole and fool people into consuming what they might not, in the absence of the admen's blandishments, need or want. In another, perhaps more profound sense, it represented the conflict between capitalism and socialism:

The fundamental choice that emerges, in the problems set to us by modern industrial production, is between man as consumer and man as user. The system of organized magic which is modern advertising is primarily important as a functional obscuring of this choice.

(1961b: 186)<sup>27</sup>

In 1969 he again stressed that advertising was the product of the failure to replace capitalism with socialism: 'Advertising is the consequence of a social failure to find means of public informa-

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<sup>25</sup> For a popular analysis from the fifties of advertising as *manipulation* see *The Hidden Persuaders* (Packard 1957)

<sup>26</sup> He also thought of advertising as 'a specific deformation of the capitalist city' (1973c: 295).

<sup>27</sup> "Advertising: the Magic system, originally written as a chapter in *The Long Revolution* (1961), withdrawn from that book for inclusion in a collective book on advertising which in the event was not published, then published in part in *New Left Review*, 4, July-August 1960 (the *Afterword* to this essay was published in *The Listener*, 31 July, 1969)." (1980a: ix) It is also worth noting that Marshall McLuhan had written an article entitled 'Advertising as a Magical Institution', *Commerce Journal*, University of Toronto, January 1952.

tion and decision over a wide range of everyday economic life.’ (1969c: 193)

Advertising is indeed a corollary of generalised commodity production. It is not, however, epiphenomenal or parasitic; it is an essential and spontaneous development once capitalist relations have reached a certain stage of density. With improvements in productivity and rising living standards the production of goods for consumption by retail customers came to dominate capitalist production. The market for the producers’ goods grew exponentially both in volume and value and the supply of goods to the final consumers, instead of being channelled and mediated through a relatively small number of agents — fellow industrialists, the state, merchants, and other traders — had to be organised across a mass market comprised of tens of thousands (and later millions) of *individual* customers. By 1900 the manufacturer of many commodities had to address as directly as possible these potential retail customers: individuals scattered throughout urban and rural areas in many countries across the world. This trend, despite economic catastrophe, wars and revolutions continued to grow throughout the opening decades of the twentieth century reaching new levels of intensity in the USA during the forties, fifties and sixties, and in Britain during the fifties, sixties and seventies. These societies, together with Japan, Australasia, Canada and Western Europe, constituted the ‘affluent society’<sup>28</sup>

The value of commodities is only finally determined and realised by their sale in the market. Therefore it is essential that they be sold. Consequently, with the proliferation of customers, mar-

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<sup>28</sup> For discussion of the affluent society see *One Dimensional Man* (Marcuse 1964 *passim*), and for Williams on Marcuse see (1969d: 162-6). For a discussion of ‘consumer society’ that, in contrast to Marcuse’s account *Eros and Civilisation* (Marcuse 1956) and *One Dimensional Man* (Marcuse 1964), is both opposed to Marx and eschews engagement with Freud, see Hannah Arendt’s book, *The Human Condition* (Arendt 1958: *passim*, but particularly: 79-135). See also Stuart Hall’s discussion of the implications for socialists of rising levels of comfort and prosperity among the working class in his essay ‘The Supply of Demand’ (Hall 1960: 79). For discussion of the conditions and representations of working class life during the late fifties and early sixties see *Representations of Working Class Life 1957-1964* (Laing 1986). For a later discussion of the damage done by rising living standards to the self-confidence and autonomy of working class people see Jeremy Seabrook’s *What Went Wrong: Working People and the Ideals of the Labour Movement* (Seabrook 1978: *passim*).

ket research and advertising became essential tools in the hands of capitalists to ensure that they could sell the goods (i.e., the ‘use values’) that they produced. For without a sale, the value and surplus value generated during the production process cannot be realised.

Williams deeply resented this process because he thought that the freedom of people to take their own decisions was undermined by a ‘mimed celebration of other people’s decisions’ (1969c: 193). Williams thought that beer should be enough for us without the promise that drinking it would enhance our manliness, our youth or our neighbourliness. Similarly with washing machines and a myriad of other products. In a tangential allusion to Marx’s theory of commodity fetishism Williams thought that the short description of advertising was *magic*. It is:

... a highly organized and professional system of magical inducements and satisfactions, functionally very similar to magical systems in simpler societies, but rather strangely coexistent with a highly developed scientific technology.

(1961b: 185)

Whereas Marx thought that the fetishism of commodities lay in the manner in which ‘the social character of labour appears to us to be an objective character of the products themselves’ (Marx 1867: 76-87), Williams thought that the fetishism of commodities lay in the promise made by advertisers that the use or consumption of particular products would enhance the life of the customer in ways that lay beyond the commodity’s simple utility.

Williams’s political objection to capitalism led him to portray the capacity of advertised commodities to enhance self-confidence, freedom of action, social standing, and sexual appeal as a general unreality that obscured the real failures of society because:

If the meanings and values generally operative in the society give no answers to, no means of negotiating, problems of death, loneliness, frustration, the need for identity and respect, then the magical system must come, mixing its charms and expedients with reality in easily available

forms, and binding the weakness to the condition which has created it.

(1961b: 190)

Without considering the alternative to capitalism promised by actually existing socialism or Williams's own vision of *common sharing* it is clear that this mode of analysis prevented Williams from either exploring or understanding the degree to which the development of capitalism resulted in people who could not merely routinely decode the multiple meanings of ads, but could compare their claims, and make sophisticated choices within the capitalist marketplace. And, perhaps more importantly, his was a mode of analysis that precluded the possibility of investigating the reflexive capacity of the 'consumer' to consciously acknowledge that they are themselves part of the spectacle of capitalist society.<sup>29</sup> It is striking that the author of 'Drama in a Dramatised Society' (1974d 1985) was unable to extend his analysis beyond the *stage* and *screen* to consider the manner in which clear majorities of people in the rich capitalist societies began to play their parts in the drama of bourgeois society.<sup>30</sup>

The commodity form in which all the products of detailed labour become directly comparable and exchangeable in the market does indeed endow material objects with magical or mysterious properties.<sup>31</sup> 'There it is a definite social relation between men, that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things.' (Marx 1867: 77) It is in the course of the development of mass consumption that the material relations

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<sup>29</sup> In another radical view of capitalism from one of Williams's contemporaries:

"The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images." (Debord 1967: I ¶ 4)

<sup>30</sup> See a suggestive article on this aspect of Williams's work in Lizzie Eldridge's article, 'Drama in a Dramaturgical Society' (Eldridge 1997: 71-88).

<sup>31</sup> In another context Williams was articulate concerning the peculiar relations between persons and things thrown up by capitalist development; when writing about Dickens's method of personifying objects and objectifying persons he argued: 'This method is very remarkable. It has its basis, of course, in certain properties of the language: perceptions of relations between persons and things. But in Dickens it is critical. It is a conscious way of seeing and showing. The city is shown as at once a social fact and a human landscape.' (1970a: 37) This approach represents a move well beyond I. A. Richards who attributed the 'delusion' of thingification or reification directly to an effect of grammar (Richards 1924: 13).

between people intensify, awarding objects the power to signify the social, and producing people who define themselves through the gestures and rhetoric of their consumption.

By the early seventies, these people — ‘consumers’ — seeing themselves as active participants, in what we might call the waking dream or spectacle of bourgeois society, were engaged in social and cultural relationships that could not be adequately described by Williams’s phrases concerning the ‘fantasy’ inherent in life under ‘late’ capitalism.<sup>32</sup> Hence the structure of feeling revealed by the new forms and conventions of advertising and the promotion of goods and services were not realisable within the parameters of his criticism or in the terms of his sociology of culture.<sup>33</sup>

The failure of Williams’s critical resources in relation to contemporary humour and television was also exhibited in a similar fashion and for similar reasons in his approach to advertising. He described the development of advertising from the earliest periods of mercantilist and capitalist trade and its relationship to the growth of the newspaper press in a fairly comprehensive manner. He was also able to describe adequately the formal changes that occurred in advertising during the last quarter of the nineteenth century and again during the interwar years.<sup>34</sup> However, when he ventured beyond simple description into analysis the weakness of his critical strategies was revealed.

More than anything else this failure to acknowledge the positive success of post-1945 capitalist society in Western Europe, North America, Japan and Australasia in creating economic relations and modes of life that effectively engaged the personalities and aspirations of millions of working class people for more than half a century revealed the absolute limit of Williams’s critical resources.

The activities of artists engaged in painting and the plastic arts, of writers and film makers, the work of graphic designers, workers in shop window display, haute couture, furniture, popular

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<sup>32</sup> For consideration of the idea of ‘late’ capitalism see Ernest Mandel’s *Marxist Economic Theory* (Mandel 1962) and *Late Capitalism* (Mandel 1972).

<sup>33</sup> For an outline of his ‘sociology of culture’ see the primer *Culture* issued in 1981 (1981: *passim*).

<sup>34</sup> For Williams’s brief history of advertising see *The Long Revolution* (1961a: 222-236); ‘Advertising: the Magic System’ (1961b: 170-184), and, *Communications* (1962: 22-34).

street fashions, photography, architecture, avant-garde and popular music – all eluded the reach of Williams’s aesthetic of emancipation and his sociology of culture. His discussion of television drama, of *Monty Python*, and of televisual flow simply did not address the scale of the problem presented to socialists by a thriving bourgeois cultural life. Neither did Williams engage in any sustained way with the dynamic manner in which capitalist society sought to confront and recuperate the growing cultural presence of feminism or the struggles of black people. Although Williams had not, since his teens, subscribed to A. A. Zhadanov’s or Christopher Caudwell’s *bourgeois decadence* or *dying culture* theses he always looked for vitality in works and relationships that were in some sense hostile to the competitive ethos of market relations. Consequently, the positive fascination with the commodity, the saturation of society with advertising, and the creation of a vast new repertoire of interchangeable modes of self-presentation, could only be approached with disapproval and observations concerning the fetishism of commodities and the *inhuman* character of capitalist relations.

Perhaps most striking is Williams’s disregard for his own theoretical positions revealed by his inability to notice cultural developments which positively engaged with capital, or at the very least did not resist it in any meaningful sense, as anything more than epiphenomenon. In other words, as *superficial* or *superstructural* elements that could give little or no insight into the real development of society. His discussion of advertising is seriously limited as was his general purchase on what might be called the spirit of his times. Consequently, he misses the invention of the ‘label’ by Pierre Cardin in 1959 and its development in the subsequent twenty years.<sup>35</sup> Beyond the discourse of commodification, he would be hard put to account for *Hari Krishna-Hari Rama*, homo-eroticism, Johnny Rotten, Sid Vicious, DIY, flexi-time, package holidays and the plethora of other cultural developments which shaped the way that most people in Britain actually encountered capitalism over the years in which Williams was most active as a cultural critic. Even among the millions of working people dispossessed and impoverished by

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<sup>35</sup> Pierre Cardin, emulated the pioneering practice of Coco Chanel and Christian Dior in licensing the use of his name on products produced by others. See (Morais 1991: 90-91).

some of the crises which afflicted British society throughout Williams's life – the elderly and disabled, the poorly educated, the possessors of outmoded skills – the aspiration to participate in the general prosperity appears to have always had much greater appeal than the ideal of socialist common sharing.

During the sixties and seventies Williams's political outlook, and that of the left generally, foregrounded the peace movement, trade union and community activities, colonial and semi-colonial wars, and internecine struggles both within and on the margins of the Labour Party. Insofar as feminism, gay liberation, or struggles against racism were embraced they were addressed from a distinctively socialist perspective in which considerable energy was expended to insert these concerns into analytical frameworks and theoretical and aspirational perspectives congenial to socialism. Given these preoccupations and the outlook that gave rise to them it was simply not within the reach or capacity of the aesthetic of emancipation to engage with cultural developments which violated the sensibilities of socialists and challenged the account of contemporary social relations believed by Williams to be essential to a proper understanding of capitalist society.

Consequently, Williams's view of the emergent social forces in British society was permanently skewed. He could not acknowledge the ability of pro-capitalist politicians, administrators, businessmen and trade unionists to overcome the difficulties that they encountered and he could not recognise developments he thought of as inimical to socialism as either creative or valuable. The capacity of bourgeois relations to engage the personality could only result in what he figured an 'alien formation'. In 1975 he explained it thus:

Can I put it in this way? I learned the experience of incorporation, I learned the reality of hegemony, I learned the saturating power of the structures of feeling of a given society, as much from my own experience as from observing the lives of others. All through our lives, if we make the effort, we uncover layers of this kind of alien formation in ourselves, and deep in ourselves. So then the recognition of it is a recognition of large elements in *our own* experience, which have to be – shall we say it? – defeated.

(1975a: 75)

This belief, redolent with wisdom born of weary experience, is derived from a view of social development that was being erased by wider social experience throughout Williams's life.