

History, Ordinary Culture, and “Structure of Feeling”

Revisiting Raymond Williams

SIMONETTA FALASCA-ZAMPONI

Abstract

Raymond Williams is not customarily referred to as a model historian. Nevertheless, his cultural materialist approach to literature can be looked at as a fundamental interpretive mode for understanding the past. In particular, Williams’s emblematic, albeit complicated, notion of “structures of feeling” makes a central contribution to the historical understanding of lived experience via an analysis of cultural production. By highlighting the constructive nature of signifying practices through his interpretation of culture as “ordinary” and an original approach to literacy, Williams’s notion of “structure of feeling” helps reassess the past as a fluid, and not already congealed, process that occurs in the tension between official discourses/articulated ideologies and practical experience.

Keywords: Structure of Feeling, Raymond Williams, Cultural Theory, Experience, Convention.

In one of his last interventions for a volume of essays on Shakespeare and cultural materialism, Raymond Williams (1994 [1985]) reiterated his vision of a culturally grounded notion of history. As he evaluated new critical readings of Shakespeare that countered traditional analyses revolving around authorship, Williams disparaged attempts to find the “essential Shakespeare” in individual works or characters. Moving away from a singular focus on content when examining drama, he battled unilinear invocations of timeliness as well as an exclusive emphasis on context or ideology. He asserted, in contrast, the historical nature of dramatic forms. Conventions of language and representation have their own timeline and inherent significance, he claimed, and should not be ignored. In the particular case of drama, its specific historical variant at Shakespeare’s time required an evaluation that moved beyond the issues of narrative or ideology and focused instead on dramatic features. According to Williams, drama is inherent-

ly multivocal, and the diversity of linguistic levels in Shakespeare's plays further warns us against a reductive interpretive reading fixed on essential experience or a singular worldview.

Written almost at the end of his life, the "Afterword" succinctly highlights a few specific features of Williams's theory of cultural materialism.¹ It restates his original assessment of the centrality of literary forms and conventions in the study of textual meanings. It makes a strong case for analyzing plays as materially produced, while looking at "the texts themselves as history" (1994 [1985]: 289). More pointedly, it confirms his engagement with the study of the past as an ever-shifting present, raising the question of how to get hold of the "felt sense of the quality of life" in a bygone period (1961: 63).

In this paper I discuss the contribution that Williams's cultural theory makes to the historical understanding of lived "experience".² More specifically, I highlight Williams's ability to address both the unsettled, ever-evolving status of historical occurrences and people's fluctuating sense of their present within changing historical conditions. Although much has been written on Williams's work, historians have for the most part underestimated his contribution to the study of the past. In a 1989 essay, Raphael Samuel made the case that, because Williams was not a true practitioner of history, there was a reciprocal discomfort between him and historians: Williams approached history laterally rather than longitudinally, cited few sources, tended to evaluate more than explain, and overall tackled history in order to confront

¹ Higgins (2007) discusses Williams's circumspect response to the collection, including the title *Political Shakespeare*. According to him, the "Afterword" signaled Williams's "unease" with the ways the volume's contributors were claiming to be applying his theory of cultural materialism in their studies.

² Experience is a heavily loaded concept that Williams felt hesitant embracing but found hard to discard completely. See among others *Politics and Letters* (1979) and *Marxism and Literature* (1977). On Williams's notion of experience see E. P. Thompson's critique (1961). Also see Martin Jay (2005), chapter 5, and Stuart Middleton (2016). The *New Left Review*'s interviewers pressed Williams hard on the issue of experience, from its connection to the literary critic F.R. Leavis to the risk of becoming epistemologically determinant and its connotation of authenticity. See *Politics and Letters*, especially the chapter "The Long Revolution" in Part II.

the present.³ While not disputing the validity of these observations, my argument is that Williams's cultural theory, and especially his notion of "structure of feeling", offers a critically important response to one of the most challenging questions at the core of historical studies: how to research the past as a fluid, and not already congealed, process—the past as "present" for those who lived in it.

Williams explicitly resorts to "structure of feeling" in order to locate the meaning of the present in the past—what people felt and thought about their lives as they were living them. "Structure of feeling" helps to identify patterns of social relations as modes of historical articulations. It is meant to illuminate the network of people's coordinated responses to events and situations at particular historical junctures. Granted, for Williams the past always functions as a tool to read the present, a way to understand our own historicity. Substantively and methodologically, however, "structure of feeling" allows defining "emergent" (or better "pre-emergent") ways of thinking and living in a specific period or epoch of the past.⁴ It generates questions such as: How did people position themselves vis-à-vis new emerging cultural formations? What did they feel at times of change? How did they respond to the discrepancy between official interpretations and their own practical experience, and did their response affect historical outcomes? Ultimately, what are people's social experiences, keeping in mind that "meaning is always *produced*; it is never simply expressed" (1977: 166)?⁵

Because the concept of "structure of feeling" is fundamental to Williams's dynamic understanding of the past as unfinished—an open project being worked over and interpreted as it is occurring—in what

³ For a discussion of Williams's historical weaknesses see Victor G. Kiernan's review of *Culture and Society* (1959). Alternatively, Stanley Aronowitz (1995) praises Williams for his historical method and ethnographic criticism.

⁴ On Williams's notion of "emergent" as opposed to the "dominant" and "residual" see *Marxism and Literature* (1977: 123), where he writes: "By 'emergent' I mean, first, that new meanings and values, new practices, new relationships and kinds of relationship are continually being created". Williams claimed that "structure of feeling", because of its connection to the unarticulated, helped understand the condition of "pre-emergence" (126).

⁵ Williams sees the need to get beyond mentalist or intellectualist accounts of meanings, which occlude much of what the general public perceives and experiences.

follows I discuss how the notion helps bring attention to the felt sense of life shared by a community while also advancing a critique of reality as objective and reified.⁶ I particularly consider the crucial role Williams saw art playing in “structure of feeling” through his interpretation of culture as “ordinary” and his original approach to literacy. By dismantling the idea of art as exceptional or singularly creative, Williams turned art into a vehicle for communicating common meanings in their uncongealed form: art is effective because it is ordinary. Similarly, literary conventions that Williams conceived as forms of language, dynamic and not fixed, became for him key elements for accessing shared sentiments. As he opposed the separation between social and personal, Williams principally focused on the communication of experience. His ultimate goal was to address the in-process nature of that seemingly simple but highly contentious notion on which we all rely: the past.

Structure of Feeling

Williams originally introduced the concept “structure of feeling” in *Preface to Film*, a 1954 book he coauthored with Michael Orrom.⁷ The impetus for elaborating the notion grew out of Williams’s concern with understanding the culture of a given period through the examination of a literary tradition. Since he saw culture as “the embodiment of the quality of living of a society” and “the ‘standard of living’ with which the critic is concerned” (1947 [cited in Higgins 1999: 14]), he looked at literature as conveying “the language of a people”. “Literature is communication in written *language*” and expresses cultural and social patterns (1950:107). Or, as he remarked about drama, “Literature, in its most general definition, is a means of communication of imaginative experience through certain written organizations of words” (1952: 14).

⁶ I am aware the notion of community is contentious and Williams’s approach to it (with its latent organicism) is not unproblematic, although he acknowledged the term’s predicaments in later works. See, among others, *Politics and Letters* (especially pp. 117-120) and *Keywords* (Introduction to the 1985 edition). I am however leaving this discussion aside here.

⁷ See more specifically the chapter “Film and the Dramatic Tradition”.

According to John Higgins (1999), the desire for alternatives to the theory of cultural reproduction dominant among orthodox Marxists (as especially represented by Louis Althusser) led Williams to formulate the concept of "structure of feeling".⁸ In a 1980 interview, Williams acknowledged that although he supported the Marxist conception of culture as a sphere of activity linked to social organization, he was aware of the quandaries generated by the Marxist emphasis on ideology.⁹ As he stated, one could not deny that "in its strictest application, the concept of ideology didn't recognize the hybrid nature of culture". From within this "culturalist" position, which countered orthodox "structuralist" interpretations, Williams argued that although any work of literature and drama could be measured against different characteristics of a period—"separable parts" such as material life, social organization, and even dominant ideas—"there yet remains some element [in the work] for which there is no external counterpart" in the "observed totality" (1979: 159).¹⁰ He opted for the phrase "structure of feeling" to express the nature of the ephemeral, yet firm, element he aimed at identifying. The phrase conveyed the sense of something akin to the consciousness of the time—a community's form of mutual understanding, though not verbalized or explicitly recognized. It was more encompassing, less limited, and better reflective of people's experiences. As Williams suggested in *Preface to Film*, "We examine each element as a precipitate, but in the living experience of the time every element was in solution, an inseparable part of a complex

⁸ Williams's relationship to Marxism is at the center of many critical accounts of his cultural theory. See among others Eagleton (ed.) (1989) and Jones (2004). The latter focuses on laying out Williams's version of sociology of culture.

⁹ "Popular Culture in Thatcher's Britain: Didier Eribon interviews Raymond Williams" posted online on 5 December 2019 by Raymond Williams Society (originally published in *Libération* 6-7 September 1980: 19-21). Williams situated his original intellectual intervention within a specific environment in Great Britain in which three distinctive understandings of culture, as he spelled them out in *The Long Revolution*, were competing for relevance. In a conservative sense, culture referred to traditional values seen as threatened by modern development. A second interpretation identified culture with the intellectual and artistic sphere in opposition to the material realm. Finally, the Marxists conceived culture as a sphere of activity linked to social organization.

¹⁰ Stuart Hall (1980) discusses culturalism and structuralism in "Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms".

whole" (1954: 21). The analytical tools available to the literary critic were not adequately meeting their external referent, Williams alleged. "Structure of feeling" was meant to address this deficiency.

In 1961, Williams offered an expanded explanation of "structure of feeling" roughly seven years after he first introduced it in *Preface to Film*. While dealing with questions of historical research, cultural theory, and meaning, *The Long Revolution* highlighted the merits of a cultural analysis geared towards identifying patterns of relationships (more specifically relationships between patterns)—a necessary premise for detecting "structures of feeling". Williams had come to advocate this approach after considering three general categories under which culture could be defined: ideal, documentary, and social, each respectively focusing on timeless values, the record of intellectual/imaginative work, and a particular way of life. Rather than deeming this abundance of definitions a hindrance, Williams regarded it as a signal of culture's inherent and genuine complexity, its reflecting the diversity of experience. As he stated, "any adequate theory of culture must include the three areas of fact to which the definitions point" (1961: 59). In order to understand the cultural process as a totality, specialized, focused studies would need to consider "the whole complex organization", that is, the "relationships between elements in a whole way of life" (1961: 63).¹¹

The phrase "structure of feeling" encapsulated and valorized the felt sense of life shared by a community. Unconscious or at least not learned, "structure of feeling" ties people together and is intrinsic to their cultural universe; "it is the particular living result of all the elements in the general organization" (1961: 64).¹² Equally important, it finds in art its most effective means of expression for it "is only realizable through experience of the work of art itself, as a whole". "It is perhaps only in art—and this is the importance of art—that it can be realized, and communicated, as a whole experience" (1954: 22, 54).

¹¹ According to Jones (2004: 11), understanding culture beyond art works and as a "whole way of life" was first introduced by T.S. Eliot as a "rendering" of the anthropological approach. Williams (1982) eventually preferred to talk about culture in terms of signifying practices.

¹² Williams described cultural history as "more than the sum of the particular histories"; it was concerned with relations between histories, "the ways in which the particular activities combined into a way of thinking and living" (1961: 63).

The arts, as the repository of recorded communication, allow access to the culture of a period in the absence of living witnesses—the arts embody more directly than any other activity the changing life of a specific epoch.¹³

Art as Ordinary

In *The Long Revolution* Williams highlighted the documentary form of art and criticized art’s valuation in terms of exceptionality and exclusiveness. A comparison of the history of “creativity” with more recent research on perception and consciousness especially demonstrated the speciousness and uselessness of invoking artists’ originality. For one, the prevailing view of the artist as a special person gifted with the ability to access levels of experience unavailable to the common folk was not a given. Furthermore, creativity did not inhere to the meaning of art, and the coupling of the two only became popular during the Renaissance via a spurious reading of Greek philosophy. After the seventeenth century, however, the then-established idea of creativity extended to include all perception, even if competing theories of reality began to question the opposition between “creative” and “natural” seeing. To be sure, ambiguity continued to characterize all approaches to creativity, and the artist was still conceived as having privileged access to original activity. Nevertheless, the interpretive movement towards enlarging the scope of creativity had enormous philosophical implications and became critical to Williams’s own reconceptualization of art.¹⁴

J. Z. Young’s *Doubt and Certainty in Science: A Biologist Reflections on the Brain* (1951) particularly helped Williams dispel the accepted identification of creativity with art. Drawing upon Young’s bold statement, “The brain of each one of us does literally create his or her own world”, Williams argued against the separation of “natu-

¹³ For an interpretation of Williams’s work as maintaining the idea of “minority culture” promoted by Leavis, whose approach Williams intended to surpass, see Stuart Middleton (2019). Middleton historicizes Williams’s “structure of feeling” within the “cultural Cold War” of the forties and fifties in Britain.

¹⁴ Herder’s focus on the plural of “culture” should also be noted here, as Williams discussed in his definition of “Culture” published in *Keywords* (1976).

ral” from “creative” seeing (cited in Williams 1961: 32). On the one hand, all human activity is creative and there is no difference between levels of perceptions, Young’s study suggested. On the other hand, if each individual brain creates its own world, it follows that there is no objective realm independent of our experience of it. Reality is our creation and subject to our own interpretations. The contrast between art and reality is a fiction. Young wrote:

In some sense we literally create the world we speak about.... The point to grasp is that we cannot speak simply as if there is a world around us of which our senses give true information. In trying to speak about what the world is like we must remember all the time that what we see and what we say depends on what we have learned; we ourselves come into the process (cited in Williams 1961: 33).¹⁵

Inspired by Young, Williams claimed that our experience is contingent both on the human brain’s stage of evolution and on the culture within which we are rooted. We cannot see the world without learning “the rules of seeing”, and he disputed the antithesis of nature and mind (or object and subject) on which theories of knowledge tend to rely. Human activities are “deeply related parts of the whole human process” (1961: 39), he claimed; our traditional belief in dualisms is inadequate.¹⁶ Williams challenged the dichotomy ordinary/extraordinary that supposedly marks the distinction between the regular person’s “natural” perception and the artist’s “exceptional seeing”.¹⁷ At the same time, while he argued for art’s importance as a vehicle of communication by which artists can pass on their experiences, he added one important caveat: the only element that distinguishes artists from other people is their particular ability to convey experience. For

¹⁵ Following Young, Williams emphasized humans’ ability to learn and relearn—a process that, enabled by social organization and tradition, has given rise to different systems of communication, from language to music to mathematics. Because “[w]e learn to see a thing by learning to describe it”, this means that seeing is related to communication, “this is the normal process of perception” (1961: 39). Art organically occupies a central role in this process.

¹⁶ As he wrote, “the consciousness is part of the reality, and the reality is part of the consciousness, in the whole process of our living organization” (1961: 39).

¹⁷ One could point out the similarities between Williams’s approach to artistic creativity and Gramsci’s view of the intellectuals. For Gramsci, “all men are intellectuals” but not all play the social function of intellectuals (Gramsci 1971).

in the end "the purpose of the skill is similar to the purpose of all general human skills of communication: the transmission of valued experience" (1961: 42).

As he faulted aesthetic theory for ignoring art's ability to transmit experience, Williams focused on the way art functions as a communicative vehicle. According to him, artists incorporate the common meanings shared in a society; they express the voice of the community. That is the reason why strangeness (or difference), which supposedly characterizes creativity, is not art's trademark nor does it determine its value. What distinguishes bad art from good art is precisely its failure to establish communication: "To succeed in art is to convey an experience to others in such a form that the experience is actively re-created—not 'contemplated,' not 'examined,' not passively received, but by response to the means, actually lived through, by those to whom it is offered" (1961: 51). By straightforwardly rejecting art's special status via an expansive notion of creativity, Williams defined art as creative because ordinary.¹⁸ Or, as he elliptically put it, "our way of seeing things is literally our way of living" (1961: 55). Ordinariness turned art into the means through which one could access the "structure of feeling". As recorded communication, art outlives its bearers and reconnects us to past-lived experience.

Convention and Form

During a late-1970s interview with the editorial board of the *New Left Review* (NLR), pressed about the theoretical deficiencies of "structure of feeling", Williams clarified that the notion laid out in *Preface to Film* "was developed as an analytic procedure for actual written works, with a very strong stress on their forms and conventions" (Wil-

¹⁸ "[T]here are, essentially, no 'ordinary' activities, if by 'ordinary' we mean the absence of creative interpretation and effort" (1961: 54). In "Culture Is Ordinary" Williams listed two aspects of culture as ordinary: "the known meanings and directions, which its members are trained to" and "the new observations and meanings, which are offered and tested" (1958: 93). At the same time, Williams claimed: "We cannot say that art is a substitute for other kinds of communication, since when successful it evidently communicates experience which is not apparently communicable in other ways". Art is an "extension of our capacity for organization" (1961: 51).

liams 1979: 159). Although seemingly confining the use of “structure of feeling” to literary analysis, Williams’s statement reinforced his idea that literary works articulate a general possession by exposing “the area of interaction between the official consciousness of an epoch—codified in its doctrines and legislation—and the whole process of actually living its consequences” (1979: 159). “Structure of feeling” was empirically efficacious for addressing the felt experience of past times by helping to locate “a pattern of impulses, restraints, tones”. Most importantly, Williams reiterated that the best evidence for identifying such pattern was to be found in “the actual conventions of literary or dramatic writing” (1979: 159). Conventions made possible accessing “structures of feeling”; they endowed art with the ability to play a critically central role in cultural analysis.¹⁹ This formal element, Williams insisted, was crucial for the applicability of “structure of feeling”.

By the time of his interview with the *NLR*, Williams’s penchant for conventions was nothing new. His early writings had devoted substantial attention to the role of literary forms in historical understanding while arguing for their significance. A product of the general creative process, forms and conventions embody and activate the values shared by a community. They are not a set of formal rules or techniques. Indeed, as Williams wrote in *Preface to Film*, etymologically “convention” means “the act of coming together”, “an assembly”, “an agreement”, or “a custom”. To be sure, Williams admitted, “conventional” also refers to “settled by stipulation or by tacit consent” as well as “agreeable to accepted standards” (1954: 15). These latter meanings combine “tacit consent” with “accepted standards” and are at the basis of our common usage of the word. Williams, however, found that they distorted and simplified the meaning of “convention”. Because we understand “conventional” to designate accepted standards, we then turn “conventional” into an adverse term that negatively hints at “routine”, “old”, “unimaginative”, and ultimately formal rules (1954: 16). And yet convention, Williams insisted, also means tacit agreement. In the case of drama, for instance, the author, performers, and audience

¹⁹ Here we see the distinction between Williams’s approach to culture and the Birmingham school’s. Williams was interested in cultural creation/production in terms of the specific social relations they carried.

all agree to meet each other's expectations about one's respective roles and relations, even if the agreement is most often tacit or unconscious. One should not look at convention as a mere method, a technique. In contrast, any dramatic method depends on mutual understanding; every age has its dramatic tradition that will be replaced as new modes of feeling develop.²⁰

Williams conceded that it is difficult to recognize the consistency of an agreement in the flux of the present. Nevertheless, he maintained, "the dramatic conventions of any given period are fundamentally related to the structure of feeling in that period" (1954: 21). They are the result of a social process—expressive means agreed upon via tacit consent. Conventions indeed change as structure changes. Consequently, that which was once perceived as natural becomes artificial, unfit, out of place. The evolutionary course of the Greek chorus and its transformations within drama exemplifies such a process. The chorus "moved from dominance in the drama, through active equal participation, to the position of a mere observer and commentator, and finally, as its distance from the center of action increased, into a mere interlude, and, finally, a hindrance". For Williams this meant that, "changes in the whole conception of a human being and of his relations with what is non-human, bring, necessarily, changes of convention in their wake. [...] All changes in the methods of an art like the drama are related, essentially, to changes in man's radical structure of feeling" (1954: 22-23).²¹

²⁰ Williams saw literary conventions as embedded within historical relations, that is, as means of production that develop within certain conditions, and he suggested that they constitute an object of social and historical analysis. See his discussion in *Politics and Letters*, Part IV, chapter "The Country and the City". Also see Jones (2004: 87).

²¹ It would be a mistake to understand traditions in drama only in terms of genre or procedures, Williams claimed. What matters, instead, is the form of experience that conventions and traditions communicate. When forms are evaluated ahistorically through the application of abstract criteria, as is the case with the canonization of the great tradition, we miss the situatedness of the author. Higgins (1999) convincingly argues that Williams's position here intends to counter Leavis's reliance on abstract formal standards as criteria for establishing the great tradition of English novels. In particular, Williams disagreed with Leavis's view that formal failure is a sign of failed maturity. Against the Cambridge English model of criticism, Williams

At first shunning any consideration of conventions as mere technical rules in *Preface to Film*, Williams later took conventions to be “constitutive evidence” of the “social material process”—modes of formal composition that are at the same time “forms of a social language” (1977: 185). “Every element of form has an active material basis” and articulates specific relations, he affirmed (1977: 190). They are vehicles through which a specific consciousness or feeling are both realized and conveyed. In line with his non-dualistic understanding of reality and his subscription to theories of perception, Williams saw language as a form of practical consciousness. Language participates in all human social and material activities. It is “the material process of sociality” itself (cited in Higgins 1999: 119). Or, as Higgins writes referencing Anthony Giddens and his notion of reflexivity, “Language does not simply determine self-consciousness; it also enables it” (2007: 41). By providing tools to describe the world, language leads us to actively construct the world. For Williams, this meant that any signifying part of a language should be considered a “dynamic fusion of ‘formal element’ and ‘meaning’—‘form’ and ‘content’” (Williams 1977: 39), not a merely fixed, unchanging, and self-contained element. Following Vološinov (1973), he suggested that language is both generative and dialectical; it is constitutive and at the same time responsive to historical and social processes.²² And because literature is a form of social language, it should also be considered along the same lines: literature contains historically developing elements that serve to detect “a changing practical consciousness” (1977: 54).²³

Even more radically, Williams extended the boundaries of literature to encompass its root meaning as “literacy”, i.e., the ability to

looked at formal deviations as signs of the writer’s reactions to and participation in the observed reality.

²² Williams writes: “Thus we can add to the necessary definition of the biological faculty of language as *constitutive* an equally necessary definition of language development—at once individual and social—as historically and socially *constituting*” (1977: 43-4). Although particularly inspired by Vološinov, Williams appreciated the whole school of Russian formalism, of which Vološinov was a representative together with Bakhtin and Medvedev.

²³ Williams was interested in the same issue of mediating between abstract objectivism and expressive subjectivism taken up, among others, by Anthony Giddens and Pierre Bourdieu.

read. With this novel focus, he not only widened the scope of literature to include "new technologies of language" besides print (1977: 53). He also emphasized that literary texts should not be looked at as mere records: they are mediums through which authors become conscious of their experience while transmitting it.²⁴ Stanley Aronowitz (1995) convincingly argues that Williams viewed fiction not as representation but, ethnographically, as a signifying practice that is constitutive of the life world.²⁵

The Challenge of the Past Tense

Through a new approach to literature and art Williams reaffirmed his trust in "structure of feeling" and maintained the usefulness of the notion as an interpretive tool able to highlight the role of human cultural activity in social life. Moreover, and this is my argument, Williams's reasoning in support of "structure of feeling", when combined with his assessment of art as ordinary and his view of conventions in terms of literacy and communication, contributes to build a powerful critique of commonly held beliefs about historical understanding. Williams's denunciation of the "conversion of experience" taking place in social analyses of contemporary life tightly connects to his more general stand against describing culture and society in the past tense—a practice that leads to ignore the "always moving substance" of the past while turning relationships and institutions into "formed wholes rather than forming and formative processes". In this operation, the social gets separated from the personal and hypostasized, whereas the "experience of the present" comes to be considered merely subjective activity (1977: 128). That which does not fit into the already "formed" is deemed "personal", with the result that experience and feelings are detached from the social process. On the one hand, when we regard

²⁴ In order to stress literature's active meaning, Williams wrote that literature "is the process and the result of formal composition within the social and formal properties of a language" (1977: 47).

²⁵ Making his case for considering Williams's work ethnographic, Aronowitz writes that in Williams's analysis "the characters of a novel or the poet's evocations are as constitutive of the life world as a conversation between two bikers or school dropouts in Hebdige's and Willis's texts" (1995: 329).

the social as past and fixed, human cultural activity is downplayed; on the other hand, fixed forms end up appearing irrelevant to understanding human experience.

Williams's idea of "structure of feeling" sought to overcome this impasse by rejecting the reduction of the social to fixed forms or the purely subjective. "Structure of feeling" was meant to capture "a kind of feeling and thinking which is indeed social and material, but each in an embryonic phase before it can become fully articulate and defined exchange". The notion hinted at "a particular quality of social experience and relationship, historically distinct from other particular qualities, which gives the sense of a generation or of a period" (1977: 131). It highlighted the "emergent" character of ways of thinking and feeling, while alerting to the link that ties a specific way of thinking to a particular generation. Qualitative transformations "are not *assumed* to be epiphenomena of changed institutions, formations, and beliefs, or merely secondary evidence of changed social and economic relations between and within classes" (1977: 131). The social encompasses more than the institutional and the formal—it exerts pressure on and affects experience and action; it also involves "*changes of presence*", that is, changes that are not yet codified while they are being lived (1977: 132).

Williams looked at "structure of feeling" as apt to conveying the "*in process*" sense fundamental for understanding "meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt" (1977: 132). Feeling was not meant to be opposed to thought. Rather one ought to consider "thought as felt and feeling as thought" (1977: 132). Feeling highlighted the role of affective elements as they interacted and came to tension with each other. In reality, unified in a structure and at first appearing individual, affective elements hold a social imprint often not recognizable until a later stage. The excitement and at the same time the challenge of "structure of feeling" lie exactly in its aim to be addressing a living process—the "articulation of *presence*"—be it in contemporary situations or, even more challenging, the past (1977: 135).

As Williams reiterated in *Marxism and Literature*, "structure of feeling" helped approximate lived experience retrospectively, while avoiding the temptation of seeing past experiences as "precipitates", codified doctrines, or recognized institutions. By reconnecting "structure of feeling" to art and literature, where affective elements and practical consciousness are more prevalent, Williams contextualized

the arts' ordinary role as signifying practices in the material world.²⁶ He also warned that the social content of art and literature could not, without loss of meaning, be reduced to "precipitate" formations in the guise of institutions or ideologies. Aesthetics is part of social experience, and one should not isolate aesthetic conventions and forms from social content. "Inalienable elements of a social material process", forms and conventions signal the emergence of new "structures of feeling" (1977: 133). They are social formations of crucial importance because they articulate living processes.

Concluding Remarks

The cultural approach advocated by Williams focuses on the process by which people negotiate their historical situatedness, entrenched as they are in the flux of the present. Williams was not afraid (indeed he claimed it was necessary) to confront the living present in all its fuzziness and prior to being transformed into a past with specific limits—the result of a posteriori evaluations. "Structure of feeling" worked to identify emergent social formations in order to approximate the "articulation of *presence*" (1977: 135). It helps address questions such as: Which of the several currents and movements within an era eventually arise to be dominant, and how does that outcome materialize amid competing pulling forces? How useful is our judgment of the past when detached from an understanding of the tensions that "occur in the process of consciousness between the articulated and the lived" (1979: 168)—the inner conflicts people experience as they confront novel situations?²⁷ Via "structure of feeling", Williams's cultural materialist analysis is especially suited for examining periods of transition, when different forces compete for affirmation as dominant semantic figures. By illuminating the process through which particular cultural articulations emerge as prevalent over others, Williams's approach warns us of the non-inevitable nature of historical outcomes. Overall, his notion of "structure of feeling" reveals as deficient any

²⁶ On this point, see Aronowitz (1995).

²⁷ See Williams (1980), "The Bloomsbury Fraction".

historical examination that ignores the relationship between the lived and the articulated.

There are of course shortcomings in the way Williams formulated “structure of feeling”. David Simpson (1995) has particularly addressed the experiential bias and the unresolved (or implicit) duality between the personal and the historical lying at the core of the notion. Even more problematic, according to him, Williams’s multiple definitions of “structure of feeling” signal the weakness and lack of exportability of the concept. While at times Williams seemed to propose a version of ideology through “structure of feeling”, at others his focus shifted to form. Moreover, the manner in which he treated the relationship between structure and feeling kept tipping in one direction or the other, never quite reaching a balance. Further, Simpson contends, epistemologically Williams fails to account for how one decides what is the past or how conventions relate to history; he cannot explain what defines pre-emergent formations either. Finally, his emphasis on uniqueness is not conducive to methodological precision.

While Simpson raises critical points, Peter Middleton (1989) argues that the risk of reifying unfinished social processes into knowable entities was a more urgent problem for Williams, who believed that social formations are never finished, nor can they ever be completely knowable. His reliance on experience stood in recognition of life processes as opposed to considering experience an ideological construct. Sean Matthews (2001) also maintains that Williams definitively emphasized process. He was trying to overcome the ideas of the social as fixed and of the personal as subjective; for this reason experience, especially lived experience, played a large role in his project. Indeed, as Middleton (1989) claims, in contrast to many of his contemporaries Williams did not subscribe to the Kantian division of experience and presence. He looked at experience from the point of view of the participant rather than the observer and as something that precedes analysis. Within this perspective, “structure of feeling” is supposed to encapsulate the lived nature of people’s relation to the world. In other words, even though in stressing the lived Williams risked “treating concepts as material agents” (Middleton 1989: 53), he was not opposing “structure of feeling” to ideology. Instead, his use of “structure of feeling” specifically addressed challenges (of whatever political nature) to the existing order by emergent social groups that did not wholly comprehend their oppositional stance and whose

means of articulation had not fully developed yet. Thus, Williams linked "structure of feeling" to art not because he saw the latter as the only place where social change takes place, but because he deemed art the forum within which social change can begin to comprehend itself. The emphasis on change is central here. Art works as "a form of preliminary social critique" and offers a window into emergent opposition against the established order (Middleton 1989: 55). Though not the agent of transformation, art operates as a form of social mediation. And while associated with feeling, it is not a conveyor of private expression.²⁸ Literary texts (and, one could add, other cultural products) articulate social consciousness; they are intersubjective. In order for us to address processes of change—and this is my point—we need to work *with* literary texts not merely *from* them.

In their discussion of British "culturalist" history of the 1960s, Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt write that historians "must be able to push beyond understanding a past social reality into imagining the social imaginary" (2000: 57). In this article I have argued that Williams's "structure of feeling" moves the center of attention away from the dominant narrative or events of a period by tapping submerged currents that, no matter how unarticulated they remained at the time, left an imprint on future social relations. The question I have raised is not how to provide a more "accurate" portrayal of history, but rather how to identify explanatory threads that can help account for historical developments. Doubtlessly, as critics have pointed out, "structure of feeling" conjures several theoretical and empirical challenges.²⁹ Nevertheless, and intimidating as it no doubt is, "structure of feeling" and more generally Williams's theory of cul-

²⁸ P. Middleton (1989) actually argues that by using the term "feeling" Williams is emphasizing emotion's transgressive potential even if his use of feeling is ambivalent.

²⁹ Higgins, for example, writes that "structure of feeling" "amounts to little more than an ingenious instance of theoretical impressionism" (1999: 169). Another strong critique came from the *NLR* collective: "Isn't there... a danger... of a kind of silent elision from the texts of a period as privileged evidence of the structures of feeling to the structures of feeling as privileged evidence of the social structure or historical epoch as such? The concept then tends to become an epistemology for gaining a comprehension of a whole society" (Williams 1979: 164). Also see Pendergast (ed.) (1995) and Eagleton (ed.) (1989).

tural materialism bring to the fore the “cognitive and affective discrepancies” in modern social experience (Gallagher and Greenblatt 2000: 62). They make that experience readable for us by focusing on unrecognized cultural formations that expose the pulsating sense of life at transitional historical moments, or the present of the past.

Bibliographic References

- Aronowitz S., “Between Criticism and Ethnography: Raymond Williams and the Intervention of Cultural Studies”, in Prendergast C. (ed.), *Cultural Materialism: Essays on Raymond Williams*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1995, pp. 320-339.
- Bakhtin M., Medvedev P., *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship: A Critical Introduction to Sociological Poetics*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1991 [1928].
- Benjamin W., “The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov”, in *Illuminations*, Schocken Books, New York 1973, pp. 83-110.
- Eagleton T. (ed.), *Raymond Williams: Critical Perspectives*, Polity Press, Oxford 1989.
- Eribon D., “Popular Culture in Thatcher’s Britain: Didier Eribon interviews Raymond Williams”, 2019 [1980], posted online on 5 December 2019 by Raymond Williams Society.
- Gallagher C., Greenblatt S., *Practicing New Historicism*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2000.
- Gramsci A., *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, International Publishers, New York 1971.
- Hall S., *Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms*, «Media, Culture and Society», 2, 1980, pp. 57-72.
- Higgins J., *Raymond Williams: Literature, Marxism, and Cultural Materialism*, Routledge, London 1999.
- *The Legacy of Raymond Williams*, «English Academy Review: Southern African Journal of English Studies», 14 (1), 2007, pp. 30-48.
- Jay M., *Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variations on a Universal Theme*, University of California Press, Berkeley 2005.

- Jones P., *Raymond Williams's Sociology of Culture: A Critical Reconstruction*, Palgrave, New York 2004.
- Kiernan V.G., *Culture and Society*, «The New Reasoner», 9, 1959, pp. 74-83.
- Matthews S., *Change and Theory in Raymond Williams's Structure of Feeling*, «Pretexts: Literary and Cultural Studies», vol. 10, no. 2, 2001, pp. 179-194.
- Merleau-Ponty M., *Adventures of the Dialectic*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston 1973.
- Middleton P., *Why Structure of Feeling?*, «News from Nowhere», 6, Raymond Williams: Third Generation, 1989, pp. 50-57.
- Middleton S., *The Concept of 'Experience' and the Making of the English Working Class, 1924-1963*, «Modern Intellectual History», vol. 13, no. 1, April 2016, pp. 179-208.
- *Raymond Williams's 'Structure of Feeling' and the Problem of Democratic Values in Britain, 1938-1961*, «Modern Intellectual History», online, 4 February 2019, pp. 1-29.
- Norris C., "Keywords", in Wallace J. et al. (eds.), *Raymond Williams Now: Knowledge, Limits and the Future*, Palgrave Macmillan, London 1997, pp. 22-39.
- O'Connor A., *Raymond Williams: Writing, Culture, Politics*, Blackwell, London 1989.
- Prendergast C. (ed.), *Cultural Materialism: Essays on Raymond Williams*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1995.
- Samuel R., 'Philosophy Teaching by Example': Past and Present in Raymond Williams, «History Workshop», 27, 1989, pp. 141-153.
- Simpson D., "Raymond Williams: Feeling for Structures, Voicing 'History'", in Prendergast C. (ed.), *Cultural Materialism: Essays on Raymond Williams*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1995 [1992], pp. 29-50.
- Thompson E.P., *The Long Revolution*, «New Left Review», 9 and 10 (May-June, July-August), 1961, pp. 24-33, 34-39.
- Vološinov V.N., *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1986 [1929].

Williams R., *The Soviet Literary Controversy in Retrospect*, «Politics and Letters», 1 (1), 1947, pp. 21-31.

——— *Reading and Criticism*, Frederick Muller, London 1950.

——— *Drama from Ibsen to Eliot*, Chatto, London 1952.

——— *Culture and Society 1780-1950*, The Hogarth Press, London 1958.

——— *The Long Revolution*, Penguin, Harmondsworth 1961.

——— *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence*, The Hogarth Press, London 1970.

——— *Lucien Goldmann and Marxism's Alternative Tradition*, «The Listener», 87 (23 March), 1972, pp. 375-376.

——— *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, Oxford University Press, New York 1985 [1976].

——— *Marxism and Literature*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1977.

——— *Politics and Letters: Interviews with New Left Review*, New Left Books, London 1979.

——— "The Bloomsbury Fraction", in *Problems in Materialism and Culture: Selected Essays*, Verso, London 1980, pp. 148-169.

——— *The Sociology of Culture*, Schocken Books, New York 1982.

——— *Towards 2000*, Chatto and Windus, London 1983.

——— "Afterword", in Dollimore J., Sinfield A. (eds.), *Political Shakespeare: Essays in Cultural Materialism*, Manchester University Press, Manchester 1985, pp. 281-289.

Williams R., Orrom M., *Preface to Film*, Film Drama Limited, London 1954.