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# **Theorising the Role of Cultural Products in Cultural Diplomacy from a Cultural Studies Perspective**

## Abstract

Cultural diplomacy continues to attract significant interest as a potential means for states to exercise ‘soft power.’ However, policymakers and academics who assert the efficacy of cultural diplomacy in terms of influencing foreign publics and states rarely consider how cultural products are actually received abroad. This article proposes that this process of reception can be better understood with reference to the theoretical approaches of Cultural Studies, which encourage us to recognise the extent to which audiences are implicated in processes of meaning-making, processes which are closely associated with the articulation of identity. By applying these approaches to cultural diplomacy, policymakers and researchers could shift their focus to an exploration of realities of the reception cultural products abroad, which would better inform their assumptions about how to achieve successful cultural diplomacy.

## Keywords

Cultural diplomacy, Cultural Studies, cultural products, soft power

## *Introduction*

The concept of cultural diplomacy continues to receive significant attention as a potential means by which nations may maximise their soft power, that is to say their power to persuade and influence either other states or the citizens of those states in order to achieve their foreign policy goals. In a recent report for the British Council, for example, the author notes the growing interest in the facilitation of cultural relations in order to achieve such goals, ranging from the creation of positive impressions and familiarity with the country producing such diplomacy, to actual influence over the

behaviour of individuals in the receiving society or over the behaviour of that society as a whole (Holden 2013, p. 22). The report gives a helpful overview of the range and level of such activity across the globe, but there clearly remains a theoretical missing link here, and more widely in the literature, in terms of the judging the effectiveness of these efforts. While there is a broad consensus that cultural diplomacy is valuable (and, therefore, implicitly effective), evidenced not least by the willingness of states to invest in these activities, the absence of clear criteria for understanding how and why such measures can be successful is not merely problematic from an academic point of view, but also in terms of the way in which policy is formulated. These are particularly urgent questions given that policymakers are faced with a rapidly changing cultural environment. Access to the products of expressive culture from other countries, such as literature, film, music, theatre and visual art, was once the preserve of wealthy elites, such as those members of the British nobility who embarked on the 'Grand Tour' of Europe's cultural highlights in the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it became common for European states (and later the USA) to establish cultural institutes, libraries and language teaching facilities across the globe in order to maintain or extend their cultural influence in countries where foreign cultural products were difficult to access (Paschalidis 2009). In today's world of globalized, digitized and networked media, however, policymakers are faced with 'multidirectional flows' (Castells 2009, 130) of information which challenge the uni-directional model of the cultural diplomacy provider addressing its audience directly and without interference from cultural background noise.

The dilemmas which this situation can create are vividly expressed in Martha Bayles' recent monograph, which addresses contemporary US public diplomacy, and also its cultural diplomacy within that broader rubric. The problem Bayles identifies is particularly acute in the US case, since the US Information Agency (USIA) which was responsible for US cultural diplomacy during the Cold War was disbanded in 1999; without an effective successor or successors, in Bayles' view. She worries that the dominance of US cultural products in the global television, music and film markets may be harming the overseas view of the United States because of the sensationalist, sexualised,

violent and individualist nature of the portrayals of American which it purveys to more conservative (often Muslim) societies which the United States would like to win over. For Bayles, this kind of globalised American popular culture, often delivered via satellite TV or the internet, presents a 'fun-house mirror' (Bayles 2014) of life in the US which the state must seek to correct through various forms of judicious public (and cultural) diplomacy. The central problem here, however, is that it is by no means clear if the state can create such a balance. Furthermore, the study of cultural diplomacy lacks a theoretical toolkit for understanding what consumers do with cultural products from abroad which might be applied in order to assess what could be achieved. In this article, I will suggest that those investing in cultural diplomacy need to start looking at the problem of effectiveness and outcomes from the other end of the telescope: Rather than attempting to define what variety of one's culture needs to be promoted abroad and how, the question should rather be framed in terms of what citizens of other states already do with the products of foreign cultures as a starting point for considering how policymakers can respond.

Writing in 2008, Eytan Gilboa suggests that the academic discipline of Cultural Studies might contribute to the development of a theoretical framework for the study of public diplomacy in general. In this article, I will investigate the potential utility of Cultural Studies not for public diplomacy as a whole, but for the subset of those public diplomacy activities which can be described using the term cultural diplomacy, and more specifically for the function of cultural products within such diplomacy. Public diplomacy in general can be described as the utilisation of channels of communication in order to influence foreign publics and, as a consequence, their governments. This might include the broadcast of new programming which offers a positive spin on the activities of the state providing the funding, as in China's CCTV News English-language television channel, or, for instance, in a public speech by a leader designed to be picked up by the world's media and addressed to the perceived concerns of foreign audiences. Cultural diplomacy, however, is not merely the vehicle for a clearly defined political message. Although the term has been used to cover a variety of activities, and often used rather vaguely, I agree with Simon Mark

that it should apply to those instances of states exposing foreign publics to certain of its cultural products, including art, literature, music, film and museum exhibits. Whereas public diplomacy is produced by the political system for a political purpose, cultural diplomacy recycles the products of the cultural life of a country in the service of foreign policy goals: 'Stated simply, cultural diplomacy is the deployment of a state's culture in support of its foreign policy goals or diplomacy' (Mark 2010, p. 43). Although the works exhibited in the context of cultural diplomacy can be specially commissioned for the purpose, as, for example, in the 2002 US photographic exhibition 'After September 11: Images from Ground Zero' by Joel Meyerowitz (Kennedy 2003), which toured the world in support of America's response to 9/11, they generally result from contexts of artistic and cultural practice which exist independently of the state's instrumentalisation of them. Even in this case, we can say that, although Meyerowitz may have been assisted and funded to take photographs of Ground Zero and have these toured as an exhibition abroad, his photography as an artistic practice does not exist for the sole purpose of transmitting US foreign policy goals.

The implicit (and often explicit) assumption among policymakers who back investment either directly in such projects or indirectly via intermediary organisations such as cultural institutes is that, as Maack states, the transmission of their national cultural will 'brin[g] about an understanding for national ideals and institutions as part of a larger attempt to build support for political and economic goals.' (Maack 2001, p. 59) This places cultural diplomacy within the scope of what Joseph Nye has famously described as 'soft power', in other words the power to 'set the agenda and attract others', closely allied with 'the ability to shape the preferences of others' (Nye 2004, p. 5). This set of assumptions, which is fundamental to the practice of cultural diplomacy, poses two theoretical difficulties. Firstly, it leaves open the question of the response of the target public to the cultural products used in cultural diplomacy. As Kennedy has demonstrated on the subject of Meyerowitz's photographs, for example, those reactions can be distinctly varied and are not obviously within the control of those funding or exhibiting the work. Secondly, if cultural diplomacy is to be better understood in the context of international relations, it would be preferable

for that understanding to develop in relation to existing international relations theory. Cultural diplomacy is a specific practice, but it takes place within the context of international relations more broadly, so thought needs to be given not just to developing a specific framework for understanding cultural diplomacy, but also to the connections between any such conceptualisation and relations between states taken as a whole. Giles Scott-Smith's assertion that public diplomacy has yet to be understood in terms of mainstream international relations theory equally holds true for cultural diplomacy, which – as I have argued – is one distinct form of public diplomacy (2008, p. 183 ff.).

It should be noted that this focus on cultural products excludes some aspects of what is often understood under the heading of cultural diplomacy, particularly exchange programmes and language teaching. The effects of these engagements on participants is certainly worth studying in and of itself (Scott-Smith 2008), and would certainly speak to the position of those who tend to promote a view of cultural diplomacy based on 'elements of exchange and mutuality.' (Jora 2013, p. 45) It is undoubtedly also the case that the presentation of cultural products abroad is often accompanied by interpersonal exchange: The English language tutor may introduce students to classics of English literature; Artists may travel abroad to promote and discuss their work or even produce work collaboratively; Exchange students may take part in programmes to visit museums and cultural venues with their hosts. However, there is a distinction to be drawn between cultural products which *can* play a part in such limited personal exchanges and the capacity of culture products to find new meanings and functions independent of this personal contact. As Walter Benjamin observed in the early twentieth century, it is a key feature of modernity that the work of art becomes 'reproducible' (Benjamin 2008), allowing it to escape the institutional contexts (e.g. church, state-sponsored museum, educational system) in which it is put to particular uses. Cultural products, from reproductions of the Mona Lisa to on-line videos, can be re-used and re-interpreted in a myriad of different ways, often re-contextualised by users in their own particular circumstances. This process is further facilitated by the rise of electronic media, which allow the individual's imagination to draw on the 'deterritorialized' products of global culture in order to

fashion their own sense of the world and their identity within it (Appadurai 1996, p. 3-4). It is the relationship of this process to the efforts of cultural diplomacy which, I will argue, Cultural Studies theory will help us to address.

The remainder of this article is divided into two sections. In the first and longer of the two, I introduce the theoretical framework and methodological approaches of Cultural Studies and ask how these might be applied to the study of cultural diplomacy in the context outlined above. In the second, shorter section, I ask how this framework might be brought together with international relations theory, before suggesting how the researchers and policymakers might approach the study of this phenomenon in the future.

### *Cultural Studies and Cultural Diplomacy*

There are good reasons for thinking that the complex of theories and approaches which have been labelled as Cultural Studies might have something to offer to a discussion of cultural diplomacy. However, it is important to state from the start that what Cultural Studies has to offer is more in the line of a set of questions and concerns than it is an easy transposable (or even unified) theory which can simply provide the above-mentioned missing link in thinking about cultural diplomacy as it applies to cultural products. Cultural Studies asks particular questions about the relationship between individuals, culture and society, with a strong focus on the consumption of cultural products. As a field of enquiry, it has yet to come to definitive conclusions about the nature of that relationship, if such a thing were possible. However, thinking about cultural diplomacy through Cultural Studies can nevertheless force us to ask questions of the practice of cultural diplomacy which would otherwise go unasked and helps us to frame those questions in productive ways.

Cultural Studies as a discipline in the UK grew out of a desire to investigate the cultural practices of audiences and consumers, and was often informed by a broadly left-wing concern with the ideological messages which cultural products appeared to contain. Over the years, it has drawn

on a range of theoretical ideas from related disciplines, such as the sociology of cultural consumption and analyses of audiences within media studies. Cultural Studies shares with these approaches a central concern with the role of the audience in constructing the meaning of cultural products and with the function of culture in terms of consumer identity (Bennett 2007). As Mark Gibson has argued at length (2007), power is a key term for Cultural Studies in its various guises since the late 1950s. Inspired to react against the concern of English literary studies for the valorisation of 'high' culture, scholars emerging from that tradition, such as Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams, began to ask questions about the nature of the 'everyday' or 'ordinary' culture of working-class people, both in the general sense of the 'structure of feeling' of which they were part (Williams 1965, p. 64) and in terms of their consumption of cultural products (newspapers, popular song, television, etc.). From the very beginning, Cultural Studies theorists were keenly aware of the relationship between such cultural products as expressions of a distinct identity and the potentially subjugating effects of mass culture as a form of ideological indoctrination in capitalist society. For example, in his classic *The Uses of Literacy* (1958), Hoggart contrasts the working-class pub sing-along as an expression of community and identity with the 1950s 'jukebox boys' who, although they are appreciating popular music like their pub-singing fathers, are depicted as slaves to an ideology of superficial materialism and consumerism. Hoggart's concern is, then, very much about power: Put simply, do mass cultural products ideologically enslave, or can they be re-fashioned by the consumer as an expression of identity which might in some way be resistant to ideology?

Later scholars of what came to be known as the Birmingham School, based around the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham (1964–2002; founded by Hoggart), became interested in the extent to which audiences might actively appropriate cultural products and make their own meanings with them. As expressed in Stuart Hall's well-known essay 'Encoding/Decoding' (1973; reprinted as Hall 1999), the Birmingham School stressed the audience's ability to modify or challenge the apparent message of, in this case, mainstream television broadcasts, emphasising how users re-interpreted cultural products according to their own

situations. It was the 'politics of signification', understood as the 'struggle in discourse' (Hall 1999, p. 61) which researchers should seek to analyse, although there was equally a recognition that audience did not necessarily emerge liberated from this struggle. When the products of mass culture were successfully appropriated, however, scholars in the Cultural Studies tradition tended to view this process in terms of the articulation of both group identity and personal identity within the group. The identities which Cultural Studies tended to focus on were often counter-hegemonic. So, for example, in Dick Hebdige's work on youth cultures (in his classic study, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* of 1979) focused on the youth subcultures in the 1970s. Here Hebdidge pointed out, for example, how the punk safety pin, apart from being a mass produced consumer product with specific practical uses, could take on other meanings when it became part of new signifying practices associated with subcultural identities. As Hebdige writes:

such commodities are indeed open to a double inflection: to 'illegitimate' as well as 'legitimate' uses. These 'humble objects' can be magically appropriated; 'stolen' by subordinate groups and made to carry 'secret' meanings (1979, p. 18)

Later publications by scholars inspired by the Cultural Studies tradition continued to emphasise not what the implied message of any artwork, text, film, piece of music or television programme might be perceived to be from the point of view of the trained academic critic, but rather on those meanings which actual audiences made with those cultural products, both individually and collectively. In many cases, cultural products which an academic public might have regarded as ideologically suspect became the source of recuperative meanings which demonstrated how individuals positioned themselves and their identities in relation to such cultural products and the dominant values of the society which produced them. Examples of this include feminist cultural theorist Angela McRobbie's work on magazines for teenage girls (1991), Janice Radway's work (1991) on American women who read romantic fiction, or Ien Ang's book (1985) on the viewers of

aspirational American soap opera *Dallas*. While McRobbie's and Radway's work is striking for pointing out how women use apparently non-feminist (if not outright anti-feminist) texts in potentially (proto-)feminist ways, Ang's research explores the ways in which women can take pleasure in texts which ostensibly reinforce the patriarchal order.

The key insight which links all of these scholars is that of the cultural product as the site of a struggle over meaning. This view of culture is summarised by John Storey as follows:

the cultural field is marked by a struggle to articulate, disarticulate, and rearticulate particular meanings, particular ideologies, particular politics. Meaning is always a social production, a human practice; and different meanings can be ascribed to the same thing, meaning is always the site of struggle. (2003 Kindle edition, location 59)

While those products may embody certain hegemonic meanings, the interpretative practice of individual consumers in the context of their own lives allows at least for the possibility of counter-hegemonic readings, although it does not make them automatic. Audiences may assent to those hegemonic meanings, but this remains an act of interpretation in which identity and context are important factors. Furthermore, Cultural Studies researchers have moved beyond Hall's original unidirectional schema, which still saw audiences primarily as on the receiving end of cultural production, even if they were able to understand cultural products in different ways. For example, in a jointly authored publication from 1997, Hall and his collaborators talk of a 'circuit of culture' involving five interlinked 'processes': They suggest that any cultural product (and indeed consumer products of any kind) can be analysed in terms of 'how it is represented, what social identities are associated with it, how it is produced and consumed, and what mechanisms regulate its distribution and use.' (du Gay et al. 1997, p. 3) In this view, Cultural Studies researchers need to pay attention not only to the conditions under which cultural products are produced and consumed, but also to the ways in which consumption itself becomes a form of production. While conditioned by the

circumstances under which it takes place, such consumption can nevertheless have an effect on those circumstances by producing and circulating new meanings about existing cultural. This reception can even extend to the production of new cultural products, as in the ever-growing phenomenon of 'fan fiction', in which devotees of mass distribution cultural products such as TV shows and films create their own narratives in response to the original. In the age of social media, it has become particularly clear that those creating cultural products do so in a context which is at least partly created by those who consume them. A contemporary example of this phenomenon are the 'Bronies,' male fans of the US television series *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*, who create fan art, fiction, music, and so on, and hold conventions and on-line discussions; all around a television series conventionally generally considered to be aimed at young girls. The self-identifying 'adolescent, male "geeks" from western countries' who make up the 'Brony' community, one researcher has argued, make use of the series 'to subvert negative and normative aspects of the geek stereotype and embrace an identity that celebrates joy, tolerance, and love' (Roberston 2013, p. 14). At the same time, they campaign for the dominance of particular representations on the show, and have, for example, instigated the modification of a character deemed to be a negative representation of a mentally disabled person; although this change in itself was then the subject of controversy in the fan community (Duell 2012).

Cultural Studies researchers, and media studies researchers who share similar approaches, have become increasingly interested in such 'fan communities' and the negotiation of identities and values which their activities imply (Hills 2002). While such 'fandom' is perhaps not a majority experience, and displays what non-users might regard as 'obsessive' investments of time and emotion in discussing and interacting with a cultural product and other members of its audience, such examples nevertheless demonstrate that cultural consumption is, firstly, a complex process of meaning-making, in which the boundary between cultural 'producers' and 'consumers' is blurred; and, secondly, that in the realm of culture both production and consumption are intrinsically bound up with the articulation and negotiation of identity in a social context. On-line 'fan communities'

may be a particularly pronounced articulation of this phenomenon, but Cultural Studies holds that all cultural consumption is determined by these factors, even if not explicitly linked to subcultural behaviour.

As already noted, a body of theory which interests itself primarily in how the messages formulated by the relatively powerful (the producers of culture) can be subverted and struggled over by the relatively powerless (its consumers) does not perforce lend itself to the study of a phenomenon like cultural diplomacy, where the entire object of the exercise, particularly from the point of view of states who practise it, is the extension of power. However, in noting that the field of Cultural Studies has perpetually oscillated between an emphasis on 'power' in terms of the imposition of ideology through culture, on the one hand, and 'agency' in terms of the relatively freedom of the consumer, on the other (Gibson 2007, p. 167), it is possible to identify an analogous relationship between the questions which scholars (and, indeed, practitioners) of cultural diplomacy should be asking about the role of cultural products and the questions which Cultural Studies has been asking since the 1950s. If Cultural Studies is concerned with how producers may or may not persuade consumers to accept a particular ideological position, then this is very close to the assumed relationship of cultural diplomacy to its consumers, who are supposed to be influenced in certain ways. Ultimately, both fields of study are interested in power, and more specifically in the power exerted (or resisted) through the consumption of cultural products. The application of Cultural Studies theory to the problem of cultural diplomacy, as noted above, does not resolve the issue of how that power is or is not exerted once and for all, but does have the virtue of drawing out attention to the issue and making us consider how making policy for cultural diplomacy might take it into account.

By making the consumers of meaning potentially also the producers of meaning, while simultaneously remaining vigilant to the possible limitations to their freedom in such meaning-making, Cultural Studies leads us to a position of greater scepticism towards any claim of a straightforward relationship between the role of cultural products in cultural diplomacy policy and

soft power outcomes. I would also argue that it is necessary to problematise the identity of ‘producer’ and ‘consumer’ with regard to cultural diplomacy, and not to fall into the trap of regarding its implementation in purely top-down terms. There is equally a danger in assuming that the rejection of such a top-down model simply leads to an open and mutually beneficial dialogue, however. In fact, looking more closely at cultural diplomacy policymaking and its implementation as a set of practices, I would argue that we need to maintain a focus on what consumers of cultural products in the context of cultural diplomacy do with those products, that is to say how they make meaning with them, and how that meaning-making relates to the original policy goals of cultural diplomacy. Furthermore, we need to challenge the assumption that the lines between producers and consumers of cultural diplomacy can be clearly drawn, recognising elements of consumption and production of meaning by different actors in the process.

I would argue that there are four categories of actor who can be regarded as making meaning with cultural products in this context, and who can therefore be described both as cultural producers and cultural consumers: namely, policymakers themselves; institutions and individuals charged with implementing cultural diplomacy policy, who I will describe as ‘agents’; cultural practitioners; and, finally, individuals engaging with cultural products which are produced for or used in cultural diplomacy.

Who belongs to these groups and to what extent do they make meaning through the consumption and production of cultural products? In terms of policymaking, funding priorities and policy goals are ultimately set by politicians in the governments and legislatures of individual nations, especially within national ministries responsible for cultural diplomacy activities. This may be the foreign ministry itself, as in the UK or Germany, or cultural diplomacy may be devolved to a separate department within that ministry, as in the United States Information Agency (1953-1999) in the US State Department (Arndt 2005). It is impossible to generalise as regards the level of direct involvement of policymakers in decisions over what kinds of cultural products will be exhibited, distributed or promoted. Some commentators have in fact suggested that an ‘arm’s length’ approach

is more productive, in that it frees the cultural diplomacy activity in question from charges of being propaganda (Gienow-Hecht and Donfried 2010). However, in the light of Cultural Studies approaches, I would suggest that policymaking itself, which generally creates the financial context in which any form of cultural diplomacy has to happen, needs to be understood as both a consumption of cultural products and a production of meaning in the process of that consumption.

To give a salient example, the recall of the US touring exhibition ‘Advancing American Art’ in 1947 by Secretary of State George Marshall was the result of a conservative backlash against the modern art which this exhibition, which had been designed specifically as a tool for promoting a positive image of the US as an advanced, cultured and civilised country abroad; thereby countering Soviet propaganda’s portrayal of the US as ‘culturally barren, a nation of gum-chewing, Chevy-driving, Dupont-sheathed philistines’ (Stonor Saunders, 1999: 19) . The modern art contained in the exhibit was deemed by its opponents to misrepresent genuine American values and replace them with ugliness and dysfunction. The actual and would-be policymakers involved in this debate were clearly making meaning with the paintings contained in this exhibition: For some it represented progressive American values, for others it represented the betrayal of those values, and both judgements are clearly bound up with conceptions of identity, i.e. what it ‘truly’ means to be American. Implicit in both views is a judgement about what cultural products can do, that is to say a belief that the exposure of foreign publics to this collection of images would have the very particular effect of shaping their view of the US as a whole, either positively or negatively. From this example, then, we can see how cultural diplomacy policymakers are engaged in a process of making meaning both about the cultural products to be exhibited, promoted and disseminated and about the nature of cultural products in general, all of which is inflected with a particular construction of their own (in this case) national identity.

Similar processes of meaning-making are also at work in those cultural institutions which are the ‘agents’ charged with implementing cultural diplomacy policy. These may be independent, (partly) government-funded organisations such as the British Council or the Goethe Institute, or

independent cultural institutions and NGOs whose funding is partly or fully reliant on speaking to the objectives of cultural diplomacy policy. Either collectively, or in terms of the individuals who work for them, I would argue that these institutions find themselves in the position of having to interpret cultural diplomacy policy in terms of their own views on the significance and utility of the cultural products which they are responsible for disseminating, and in terms of their views of the value of cultural exchange as a phenomenon. Those views are bound up with their own sense of institutional or personal identity, and as Melissa Nesbitt's research has shown, institutions and individuals are often forced to enter into pragmatic accommodations with policymakers in order both to benefit from the funding linked to cultural diplomacy and to maintain their own values and sense of identity, which express themselves in their relationship to the cultural products they are charged with curating, exhibiting, distributing, etc. (Nesbitt 2011). Although there is a great deal more work to be done in this area, a study such as Nikolas Glover's analysis of the early history of the Swedish Institute also suggests that, as is the case for policymakers, the relationship of agents of cultural diplomacy to the negotiation of national identity may be equally important. Glover points out how, in the first 25 years of its operation, the Institute provided a forum in which the meaning of Swedish-ness in the contemporary world was defined and re-defined, sometimes with as much reference to domestic debates as to foreign policy priorities (Glover 2011).

A similar situation pertains with cultural practitioners (artists, writers, performers, etc.) who, like the institutional agents of cultural diplomacy, may rely to some extent on the funding available for the implementation of cultural diplomacy policy. As Bourdieu points out, the position of the artist in modernity is increasingly characterised both by the development of an identity centred on notions of artistic autonomy and integrity and by the need to function in a cultural marketplace (Bourdieu 1996). Cultural diplomacy provides a source of funding through which cultural practitioners can continue their work, but the perceived purpose of that funding can stand at odds with their sense of identity as artistic practitioners. For example, US-based theatre practitioner Daniel Banks describes how his own conception of what theatre is for and can do for participants in

terms of community-building and conscientious-raising can be at odds with the desire of the sponsoring institution to produce certain cultural diplomacy outcomes: ‘Sometimes the organizational culture of a sponsoring organization will be incongruous with the ethos and methodology of creative, liberatory work.’ (2011, p. 111) Banks’ practice is clearly driven both by ethical (‘liberatory’) and artistic (‘creative’) goals, which he recognises as central to his identity as an artist, and which must in some way be preserved in the face of what the funding institution is inferred to see as the purpose of his practice. Again, drawing on Nisbett’s work (2011), we can see that some artistic practitioners have a more straightforwardly instrumentalist view of their engagement with institutions of cultural diplomacy, which they recognise primarily as sources of much needed funding, which will allow them to pursue projects of personal value to them which they can also present in cultural diplomacy terms with little compromise on their part. The key point here is that cultural production is bound up for these participants with questions of identity, and that the policy goal provides a context within which that sense of self must be negotiated; potentially, as in Banks’ case, smuggling in new agendas to the work which were not intended either by the policymaker or the commissioning institution.

Finally, we also have to consider the meaning-making any consumer of those cultural products which are funded, disseminated or promoted in the context of cultural diplomacy. Based on the approaches of Cultural Studies, we must start from the position that individual and collective engagement with cultural products, whether presented in the context of cultural diplomacy or not, will be determined by questions of identity and processes of meaning-making. In the context of the study of cultural diplomacy, we will need to pay attention to the ways in which audiences collectively and individually negotiate the meaning of the cultural products they encounter, which may or may not be relevant to the ‘foreignness’ of those products. The key question will be whether the meanings audiences make with cultural products line up with the meanings policymakers seek to project, and equally whether and how the activity of agents of cultural diplomacy and cultural practitioners can successfully intervene in that meaning-making.

To offer a concrete example of how such an analysis might proceed, I will look briefly at the case of Japanese cultural diplomacy and manga (comics) and anime (animated films and television programmes). As Nissim Kadosh Otmazgin shows, Japanese external cultural policy went through three distinct phases in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. During the imperialist phase of Japanese conquests in South-East Asia prior to defeat in the Second World War, the dissemination of Japanese culture was seen primarily as a tool for cementing imperial ties in conquered countries such as Korea. Following the Second World War, Japan's neighbours were understandably reluctant to engage with Japanese culture, and indeed many Japanese cultural products were banned in South Korea until 1998. Successive Japanese governments fostered an inward-looking cultural policy based on traditional Japanese arts and heritage, emphasising the uniqueness of Japanese culture while also distancing themselves from any politically suspect attempt to spread that culture in the region. In the 1990s, however, the Japanese state recognised the potential of Japanese popular culture such as manga and anime to promote an image of Japan abroad as a 'cool' country (Kadosh Otmazgin 2012). Efforts to help promote this image through cultural products are perceived by Japanese politicians as a tool both to boost the economy and to 'nurture positive appreciation of the country overseas' (Kadosh Otmazgin 2012, p. 53). This latter 'soft power' notion is noticeably vague, but demonstrates the extent to which policymakers construct more or less precise notions of the utility of culture in international relations as a justification for the allocation of resources to its promotion.

This example highlights the extent to which cultural diplomacy often attempts to make use of cultural products which generally have an existence outside of policy itself. In fact, Japan's promotion of its popular culture rides on the coat-tails of developments driven by the private sector and by global cultural flows not within the control of the Japanese state. As with other products in a globalized cultural economy, the question of what meanings are made with manga and anime cannot be taken for granted in the ways that policymakers (and, indeed, the Japanese institutions charged with promoting them) would assume. As Peter van Ham observes, 'in today's global flow of culture, [...] [s]elective borrowing and creative appropriation tend to result in cultural *bricolage*,

where outside cultural influences are adapted and mimicked with surprising ease and equally surprising results.’ (Van Ham 2010, p. 67)

While I am not aware of research which explores the attitudes of manga/anime artists to the Japanese government’s cultural diplomacy policy, there is some scholarship which gives a good indication of the ways in which the Japanese-ness of these cultural products might be perceived and engaged with by different overseas populations. The first point to make is that overseas consumers of Japanese popular culture do not consume that culture in its entirety any more than Japanese consumers would. In fact, they can be highly selective. For example, Fran Martin’s study considers Taiwanese young women who are fans of Japanese boy love (BL) manga depicting idealised comic-book romances about young men. What Martin’s work demonstrates is that Taiwanese BL fans are themselves by no means unanimous on the reasons for their interest and pleasure in these comics, with her interviewees advancing a number of theories about the causes of this fandom, theories in which gender roles and sexuality are key themes. However, as Martin observes: ‘Finding the *right* answers to these questions is less important than recognising the opportunity that BL affords young women readers to share the process of collectively thinking them through in a women-dominated cultural space.’ (Martin 2012, p. 373; emphasis in original) Arguably, BL manga, a Japanese cultural import, allows young women an opportunity to address questions of gender and sexuality in a space outside the norms of their own culture. The value of such a space is also highlighted by Jin Kyu Park’s study of young Americans who use Japanese anime in the context of a questing spiritual identity. Among those who reject the values of mainstream American popular culture alongside organised religion, Park points out, consuming anime may be only one element in a *bricolage* of cultural consumption made up of products of their own individual choosing: ‘These spiritual seekers seem to incorporate the cultural environment [...], and its abundance of religious symbolism, into their religious sensibility by constructing a unique cultural space matching their own spiritual dispositions.’ (Park 2005, p. 407) In this sense it may be questionable to regard them as consuming anime as a way of accessing Japanese culture more generally.

What both of these studies demonstrate is that Japan and Japanese-ness are not necessarily central to the consumption of Japanese popular culture. These consumers are primarily concerned with understanding themselves in ways which are facilitated by that consumption, but which do not automatically entail a shift in views of Japan as a state or the actions of that state. Japan and Japanese culture become in essence a space into which individual concerns can be projected and worked through. This is not to rule out a positive effect in terms of general perceptions of Japan among foreign populations, but these effects are yet to be established and cannot be taken for granted if Cultural Studies approaches are applied. Nevertheless, if cultural diplomacy is to achieve the goals defined by policymakers, apart from the rather straightforward aim of selling more of these products as a boost to the national economy, policymaking and its implementation need to be informed by an understanding of what audiences do with cultural products in terms of their own meaning-making and the function that cultural products from outside their own national culture might play in that process.

### *Framing the Debate within International Relations Theory*

While the application of Cultural Studies approaches to the reception of cultural products opens up new questions for the study of cultural diplomacy, it also presents a significant danger. If we take the fundamental insight of Cultural Studies to be that cultural products encode particular messages, but that audiences nevertheless have a (relative) freedom to make their own meanings with those cultural products, then it is entirely possible to slip into the kind of 'banality' which Meaghan Morris famously criticised in the discipline, namely of repeating this same basic point in relation to different cases in an essentially celebratory validation of the creative power of the apparently powerless (Morris 1996). From the perspective of policymakers in the field of cultural diplomacy, on the contrary, such an insight would hardly be cause for celebration: If they have little control over what consumers in other countries make of the cultural products from their nation, whether

promoted, distributed and sponsored by cultural diplomacy policy or not, then it would arguably be hard to find a logic for continuing to invest time and resources in formulating such a policy.

Nye's conception of 'soft power' as it applies to cultural diplomacy, for example, would seriously be called into doubt, at least as far as the function of cultural products in such diplomacy is concerned. Nye argues that exposure to positive aspects of a state's 'culture' (understood, perhaps, in both senses as its way of life and its cultural products) will make others less hostile and more willing to take its side. This view is a version of liberalism, which assumes that shared values are both possible and ultimately beneficial, in that the states (and their citizens) who share them are unlikely to enter into conflict with each other. However, as opposed to the kind of cultural internationalism described by Iriye for the interwar period (1997), which imagined the dialogic creation of a shared international culture as a means to peace, Nye's position is an 'agent-centred' (Van Ham 2010: p. 8), top-down version of liberalism: He essentially argues for the propagation of the culture of the world's most powerful state among other states who might otherwise resist that power, in order to create peace on US terms. Yet, within a Cultural Studies framework (at least as it pertains to cultural products), the application of this scenario to cultural diplomacy begins to seem much less plausible. The assumption that encountering certain cultural products would lead to citizens of other states making sense of them in the way deemed appropriate is seriously in doubt.

Constructivist approaches to international relations also see potential in public diplomacy in general and cultural diplomacy more specifically (Gilboa 2008, p. 75). Here the emphasis lies not on the acceptance by others of the values transported in the sending nation's cultural products, but rather on the creation of shared identities in the process of cultural transmission and dialogue. Cesar Villanueva Rivas argues, for example, that

[c]ultural and public diplomacies can benefit from one of the most important social facts proposed by constructivist theory: collective identities. Constructivists contend that not only are identities and interests of actors 'socially constructed,' but also that they must share the

stage with a whole host of other ideational factors emanating from people as cultural beings. A core feature of cultural and public diplomacies may be precisely the construction of collective identities of peace, understanding and diversity at the international level. For the constructivist camp, values, norms, interests and behaviors are dependent on the collective identity a group assumes. (Villanueva Rivas 2010)

Broadly, constructivists like Villanueva Rivas would claim, unlike their liberal counterparts, that we cannot assume that one group can simply transfer its identity and values onto another by means of one-way cultural influence, but that processes of cultural engagement shape the identities of both parties and have the potential to foster collective identities.

Mai'a K. Davis Cross attempts to show how this might work in terms of cultural diplomacy, using 'the hypothetical example of a Hungarian touring music group'. She argues that such cultural diplomacy might not only promote certain values which Hungarians hold dear (e.g. the openness of Hungarian society and its traditional values), but also – through engagement with those who go to see the musical performance – might also 'involve their external audiences' and allow those audiences to bring their own values into a new shared set of values (Davis Cross 2013). Attractive though this notion might be, it is telling that Davis Cross uses only a hypothetical example, and one which involves direct contact between performers and audiences; although one would have to ask how this direct contact is actually orchestrated, since the audience might just as well watch the performance and then leave the building in silence. If the music in question were on a CD sold through an internet provider, or available as an MP3 download, the outcome of such engagement in terms of shared formation of values and identities between cultural practitioners and audiences might arguably become even more difficult to locate. While cultural diplomacy has traditionally focused on the kind of situated cultural engagement described by Davis Cross, for example through national cultural institutes and the various cultural events they organise or sponsor abroad, in the era of global cultural flows, when the majority of engagements with cultural products will not take

place with the cultural practitioner and the audience present in the same place, and indeed when the majority of engagements with foreign culture may well not have been facilitated by official cultural diplomacy at all, this scenario begins to seem marginal at best.

The constructivist approach would appear to chime with the emphasis which Cultural Studies places on the effects on individual and group identity of engagement with cultural products, in as far as one might argue that actors come to construct those identities and the interests which pertain to them differently by engaging with cultural products. However, this potentially brings us back to the problem of a 'banal' reasoning in Morris' sense, in that we do not get much beyond simply observing that individuals make meaning when they engage with cultural products and do so in a way which has something to say about how they make sense of themselves and their place in the world. From the point of view of cultural diplomacy policymaking, it may speak of a certain realism to acknowledge that this 'making sense' is difficult to predict or shape, as Cultural Studies demonstrates, but this insight undermines the liberal 'soft power' version of events as much as it does the constructivist narrative, since constructivist accounts like that proposed by Davis Cross, despite their emphasis on the shared creation of meaning, nevertheless make clear assumptions about how such interactions will proceed and what kind of meanings are likely to emerge. How, from a pragmatic point of view, can states formulate their cultural diplomacy policy in such a way that it will help to foster the kind of identity formation among foreign publics which have the kind of positive outcomes desired? In the light of Cultural Studies theories of reception and the production of meaning, neither liberal nor constructivist approaches appear to offer clear answers, and we are left with the paradox that, although cultural products may appear to offer a resource for achieving foreign policy goals, and do have some observable effects on foreign populations, it remains unclear how any state might 'wield' that resource (Van Ham 2010, p. 67).

As I predicted at the beginning of this article, Cultural Studies has not necessarily helped us to resolve the problem outlined above, but it does have the virtue of bringing that problem more sharply into focus. Diplomats committed to cultural diplomacy, recognising no doubt the difficulties

of assessing the effectiveness of cultural diplomacy approaches, tend to argue for an approach which skirts around the question of how such effectiveness can be assessed while re-affirming their faith that it does exist. One former US ambassador states baldly that '[c]ultural diplomacy cannot be effectively measured; it makes a qualitative, not quantitative, difference in relations between nations and peoples.' (Schneider 2006, p. 196) Similarly, Mitchell, a former UK representative of the British Council, makes a strong case for various forms of cultural diplomacy, while similarly insisting that the outcomes, although positive, cannot ultimately be pinned down (Mitchell 1986). Faced with such positions, the assertion that it is possible to achieve positive outcomes of influence through cultural diplomacy remains, as Yudhishtir Raj Isar puts it, 'more a matter of faith than of evidence.' (Raj Isar 2010)

### *Conclusion*

What I would propose in light of the above is that, faced with the profound uncertainty about the outcomes of cultural diplomacy in terms of international relations, both researchers and policymakers need to start by looking at the outcomes which already exist. As the examples from the case of Japanese manga/anime culture highlighted above demonstrate, much international cultural exchange is facilitated by a global cultural market over which states have relatively little control. Global media are, if anything, more likely to be influenced by corporations, although even they equally do not ultimately control the modes of reception and re-interpretation to which cultural products are subject. Although it is unclear to what extent the Japanese government has been able to shape this process *in media res*, its approach of seeking to manage or support phenomena of international culture exchange which happen independently of cultural diplomacy policy initiatives does at least point a way out of the conundrum of how to create such phenomena to one's own advantage. We can see a similar example in the recent popularity of Turkish soap operas in Arab countries, which has been credited with improving the attractiveness of Turkey as a point of cultural

orientation, and with bolstering a positive attitude in those countries towards the Turkish state (Bilbassy-Charters 2010). However, at the moment, such reactive approaches to cultural diplomacy do not go far beyond gratefully riding on the coat-tails of emerging inter-cultural phenomena in a globalising media market, and states like Japan and Turkey do not seem to have a clear sense of how they could shape or influence outcomes to their advantage. I would argue that this is primarily because they have so far only taken notice of the popularity of certain of their national cultural products and have not yet paid detailed attention to the meanings which consumers of those products are producing in their own contexts.

A more rigorous approach might be achieved on the basis of a closer analysis of the ways in which such cultural products are used and interpreted in other countries, which would provide a new starting-point for formulating policy: Not on the basis of assumptions about what the long-term effects of one measure or another are likely to be, but rather in response to effects that are already taking place. This is where Cultural Studies' close attention to the meaning-making potential of consumers is particularly helpful, in that it would provide a set of approaches for taking account of the perceptions, values and identities which policymakers hope to influence, whether in a liberal or a constructivist frame, and would pose the question of how policy can be formulated in response to existing meaning-making practices. In other words, Cultural Studies suggests that policymakers in the field of cultural diplomacy need to begin by undertaking careful research into existing audience behaviour, with a particular emphasis on the meaning-making aspect of reception, before deciding if and how it is possible for states to promote soft power benefits by intervening in this process. This is, however, a modest conclusion, in the sense that such research would only be the first step towards assessing the extent to which it is possible for states to influence the perceptions of foreign publics by cultural means, and cannot be based on an assumption that this will eventually be the case.

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