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Cultural Sociology 2008; 2; 157
DOI: 10.1177/1749975508091030

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Clifford Geertz and the Strong Program: The Human Sciences and Cultural Sociology

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ABSTRACT

In his massively influential work, Clifford Geertz crystallized core methodological and theoretical elements of a strong program in cultural sociology, a program that argues for a meaning-centered social science. If meaning is to be so central, then the theoretical tools that the humanities have developed to investigate art and language must become central to the human sciences more generally. The 'thick descriptions' Geertz proposes for social science are powerful reconstructions of the empirical, not simply detailed observations. Likewise, the local knowledge Geertz valorized is inevitably rooted in more encompassing, global meaning-structures, even while every global theme becomes not enriched but different as it emerges locally. Interests can never be objective, and extra-individual structures are both cultural and social at the same time. Yet, while structures are central, they take form only through contingent process, and intertwining them is what Geertz's turn to performance was about.

KEY WORDS

cultural sociology / Geertz / hermeneutics / interpretation / strong program / theory

Introduction

What did Clifford Geertz mean? What was his significance? What did he signify, crystallize, make possible? These are contentious questions, have been, and will continue to be. There have been decades already of fighting about 'Geertz'. Such interpretive disputes are the lot of every exemplary

figure. Interpreting is a way of positioning, of saying who we are, in relation to an intellectual icon, placing ourselves alongside him, against him, or somewhere in between. Lack of agreement, not only about propositions but about presuppositions, is the reality of intellectual life in the human sciences.

In October 2007, the Yale Center for Cultural Sociology invited scholars, theorists and empirical researchers from across several disciplines to think about 'Geertz' in a critical and future-oriented way. We did not all agree about who the person in quotes was, not even those among us who were cultural sociologists, not even the subset of those who most identify with the intellectual project of the strong program in cultural sociology, whose articles follow later. We all did agree, nonetheless, that 'Geertz' has been of great significance to the last half century of the human sciences, and in all likelihood will continue to be.

What follows is my own introduction to the question of who 'Geertz' was and what he means, or should mean, to cultural sociology today.

The Questions of Method: Structural Hermeneutics

We titled the Yale conference 'Clifford Geertz and the Human Sciences', not 'Clifford Geertz and the Social Sciences'. It is critical that Geertz spoke out, articulately and persistently, for the idea of a human rather than a specifically social science. 'Human sciences' represents the conventional translation of Wilhelm Dilthey's *Geisteswissenschaften*, literally the sciences of the spirit. Dilthey called his philosophical position 'hermeneutics' (after Schleiermacher), pointing to the significance of interpretation as compared to observation. Interpretation is central for the human sciences because the inner life is pivotal for social action and collective subjectivity alike. Dilthey (1976) believed that to concentrate on the outer, visible shell of human actions, as compared to the inner invisible spirit, is mistakenly to import into the human sciences concepts like objective force and efficient cause. When the inner life of society becomes our focus, we must give up on the project of a predictive science of laws. Our goal, however, should remain a generalized science that can establish models.

This deeply original and controversial position of Dilthey was never systematically taken up in the modern social sciences, despite the ambivalent efforts of some Weberians and Parsonians to keep it alive.¹ What developed, instead, was a split inside of the human studies, a split that has produced the grand canyon between the humanities and the social sciences across which we peer today. Clifford Geertz was the most important postwar social thinker not only to build a bridge across this divide, but also to undermine its very existence. In doing so, he took up the challenge that Dilthey had originally laid down. For four decades, Geertz adamantly asserted the humanistic nature of social science and its interpretive character, not only against the grain of entrenched disciplinary interests, but also against such an interdisciplinary thinker as the 'incurable theorist' who was his teacher, Talcott Parsons himself.

Geertz evoked forthrightly the hermeneutical understanding of science. 'What I am doing fits well enough under such a rubric', he writes in his introduction to *Local Knowledge*, adding only one significant proviso – 'particularly if the word "cultural" is affixed' (1983: 5). Indeed, Geertz fits his anthropological work rather precisely into the hermeneutical circle. In 'The Native's Point of View', he presents his empirical investigations as employing the part/whole method that Dilthey had pithily modeled: 'Hopping back and forth between the whole conceived through the parts that actualize it and the parts conceived through the whole that motivates them, we seek to turn them, by a sort of intellectual perpetual motion, into explications of one another' (1983: 69).

Such an understanding of Geertz's interpretive method allows us to challenge two rather hegemonic (mis)understandings. The first concerns local knowledge. The local is certainly part of the story, but not all of it. Knowledge, or meaning, is circular. On the one hand, it is experience-dependent, or local. On the other hand, it is impersonal, or global. Pointing to 'the characteristic intellectual movement, the inward conceptual rhythm' of his empirical analyses, Geertz draws attention to 'a continuous dialectical tacking between the most local of local detail and the most global of global structure in such a way as to bring them into simultaneous view' (1983: 69). Local knowledge here plays the role of *part*, a part that must be placed against the 'global' whole for its meaning to be understood.²

If Geertz does, in fact, understand the local in terms of the distant – 'the most global of global structure' – why, then, does he so often seem to make epistemological necessity into heroic ethnographic virtue? Why does he sometimes present his work as privileging local knowledge against more collective and more macro levels of the social? This performative contradiction, along with others, will be an issue to which each of the essays that follows returns. I will only suggest here that, in addressing this issue, matters of intellectual biography cannot be ignored. Geertz became 'Geertz' by fighting against two authorities who loomed as the intellectual giants of his time, Claude Lévi-Strauss and Talcott Parsons. He overthrew them by characterizing their work, and perhaps also distorting it, as concerned only with the global and far-away, as promoting a mechanistic and deductive approach to meaning that a more hermeneutical cultural science would oppose.³

There is a second (mis)conception about Geertzian method that is challenged by this hermeneutical understanding. This is the idea that interpretive social science is actually, and merely, descriptive. Waving the Geertzian flag of 'thick description', the cultural approach in social science is often equated simply with close and minute observation, with listening, with a kind of sensitive and conscientious academic journalism. But this is decidedly what thickness is not. The description is thick, in Geertz's sense, when it is analytically informed and culturally contextualized. It is thick because deep meanings are 'always already there' *before* any observation or social scientific account. The parts, in other words, are always, even if unconsciously, seen against previously existing wholes.

'Ethnographic descriptions' are so 'extraordinarily thick', Geertz suggests in his introduction to *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 'because most of what we need to comprehend a particular event, ritual, custom, idea, or whatever is insinuated as background information before the thing itself is directly examined' (1972: 9). Observations may present themselves as descriptions, but actually they are not: they are meaning constructions. When social scientists offer thick descriptions, they are presenting hermeneutical *reconstructions* built up from the circularity of part-whole relations. Their aim is to discover not only actors' expressed motives, but also the cultural structures upon which they depend, the 'systematic unpackings of the conceptual world in which *condottiere*, Calvinists, or paranoids live' (Geertz, 1983: 22). Actors' interpretations and the culture structures upon which they depend — it is these, not mechanisms and causes, which are for Geertz the holy grail of a *human science*.

The hermeneutic idea of an interpretive (re)construction does not so much replace the goal of explanation as redefine it. 'Interpretive explanation', Geertz assures us in 'Blurred Genres: The Refiguration of Social Thought', is 'a form of explanation, not just exalted glossography'. What is distinctive to hermeneutics is not that explanation is sought but where it is found. Interpretive explanation 'issues not in laws like Boyle's, or even forces like Volta's, or mechanisms like Darwin's, but in constructions like Burckhardt's, Weber's, or Freud's' (1983: 22). Geertz goes on to say:

Social events do have causes and social institutions effects; but it just may be that the road to discovering what we assert in asserting this lies less through postulating forces and measuring them than through noting expressions and inspecting them. (1983: 34)⁴

It was inside this hermeneutic, not merely descriptive, methodological context that Geertz called for a 'refiguration' of social theory, 'a sea change in our notion not so much of what knowledge is but of what it is we want to know' (1983: 34). While this appeal for transforming the relation between social science and the humanities seemed rather rhetorical, it was, instead, the logical and ineluctable conclusion of Geertz's hermeneutic understanding. If, as he believed, it is convictions, feelings, ethics, dramas, and patterned texts of meaning that give life to society, then the proudly mechanistic techniques of a counting science can hardly help us find our way.

Why was Clifford Geertz able so confidently to articulate such a radically hermeneutic methodological position, when even his most culturally inclined predecessors and contemporaries had largely been unable to do so? One might evoke the nature of Geertz's intellectual times. He was, for example, both personally and intellectually close to Thomas Kuhn, whose understandings of paradigm and exemplar for the first time laid out a powerfully hermeneutic approach to the philosophy and history of science. However, I would like to explore a more intellectual reason for Geertz's self-confidence. It relates to a philosophical development that was more or less completed, though it was hardly well known, by the time Geertz had begun to write.

Geertz had a singular advantage over those who had earlier wondered how they could take up Dilthey's fallen staff. He wrote after the linguistic turn had transformed philosophy, semiotics, and literary method in the first half of the 20th century. Before this turn, and before its significance was appreciated, Dilthey's hermeneutics had been misperceived as psychological and individualistic, as a method that focused on 'consciousness'. In fact, Dilthey's method was collective, structural, and textual. Dilthey used Hegel to historicize Kant; he understood the consciousness that was to be the object of his new hermeneutical science as an 'objective *Geist*'. It was this historically and sociologically situated (and thus 'objective') *geist* – or cultural structure – that Dilthey offered as the subject of the human sciences.⁵

Geertz was able to understand Dilthey correctly because he was the beneficiary of the great philosophical movement from consciousness to language that marked the first half of the 20th century. It was a movement that was generated, not only by Heidegger and Wittgenstein, but also by Saussure and Jakobson. It is because of this linguistic turn that Geertz can speak of human beings as 'signifying' animals; that his language from the early 1960s onwards is sprinkled with such concepts as 'signs', 'symbols', and 'languages', and that he manages so effectively, despite his earlier ties to Parsons, to slough off words like 'system' for ideas like 'structure' and 'pattern'.⁶ This ability to transform the linguistic turn into social science is pivotal to Geertz's early statement, 'Ideology as a Cultural System'. He notes 'the virtual absence in strain theory (or in interest theory either) of anything more than the most rudimentary conception of the process of symbolic formulation', and suggests that both theories 'go directly from source analysis to consequence analysis without ever seriously examining ideologies as systems of interacting symbols, as patterns of interworking meanings' (1972: 207).

The linguistic turn allowed Clifford Geertz to see through the conceit that had hobbled the subjectively-oriented social science of his day, and which continues to confound our own as well. This is the idea that we can get into the heads of others. Geertz insisted, to the contrary, that our focus can only be on what Dilthey called *geisten* and which, after the linguistic turn, many contemporary cultural sociologists have taken to calling culture structures. These are the social texts that are simultaneously the source of individual subjectivities and their expression. It is only these *texts* that are available. We do not have access to subjectivity or consciousness in itself. In 'Deep Play', Geertz describes the Balinese cockfight as a 'collectively sustained symbolic structure'. It is because social forms have this status, he explains, that 'the analysis of cultural forms [is] parallel with penetrating a literary text' (1972: 448).

The Questions of Theory: Cultural Reality and Structural Interests

It is within these basic hermeneutical presuppositions that the core empirical propositions of Geertz's work are nested.

Proposition 1: Social structures do not exist objectively.

Realism cannot be the job description of social science, in supposed contrast with the imaginative focus of the humanities and the arts. 'In the study of culture', Geertz explains, 'analysis penetrates into the very body of the object.' As social scientists, in other words, we do not actually have 'real objects' to work with. Rather, 'we begin with our *interpretations* of what our informants are up to, or think they are up to, and then systematize those'. The result is that 'the line between (Moroccan) culture as a *natural* fact and (Moroccan) culture as a *theoretical* entity tends to get blurred'. If the line between theoretical entity and natural fact is blurred, there can only be one conclusion, and Geertz is not afraid to draw it. 'Anthropological writings are', he acknowledges, 'fictions.' Not fiction in the sense that they are false or *un-factual*, but in this sense: they are '*themselves* interpretations, and second and third order ones to boot' (1972: 15, italics added). Henry James once described the obligations of a novelist in much the same way. The fiction writer must convince readers that his third order descriptions of consciousness are first and second order ones.⁷

And it was undoubtedly another Jamesian tenet, that art can be as truthful as science, that led Geertz, in his late *Works and Lives*, to warn against the mistake – 'endemic in the West since Plato' – of confusing 'the imagined with the imaginary, the fictional with the false', of 'making this out with making them up' (1988: 140). Social things are real, but realism is not. It is a genre (Brooks, 1995). The reality of social things is asserted; we may or may not take these assertions as true. Whether we do take them as real depends on whether we make them so. This depends on whether their dramatic presentation is convincing. Geertz explains all this very carefully in his extraordinary early essay on religion. A symbolic order works by 'establishing powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men'. It does this by 'formulating conceptions' and 'clothing' them 'with such an aura of factuality' that they seem 'uniquely realistic' (1972: 90).

Proposition 2: Actors do not have 'interests' as such.

Interests are realist constructions. They are performative achievements. This second theoretical proposition follows directly from the first.

Proposition 3: Social structures are at the same time cultural structures.

Here are some of the phrases that Geertz employed to indicate cultural structure: public code, cultural category, stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures, structure of signification, pattern of interworking meanings, symbolic structure (1972: 6–7, 9, 207, 450), and symbolic form (1983: 59).

Geertz specified this proposition about culture structure in three ways:

- 1) As semiotic constructions, these culture structures are composed of binary codes: 'Values and disvalues', as Geertz once rather wryly described the contents of Balinese culture (1972: 446) or 'symbolic expressions' and their 'direct inversion', as he more earthily described the Balinese views of their cocks (1972: 419).
- 2) These binary codes are at the heart of narratives, chronologically oriented 'webs of significance' (1972: 5). It is no accident that Geertz and his subjects are always telling stories.
- 3) Codes and narratives, which operate semantically, are crystallized by rhetorical devices that work at more syntactic and pragmatic levels. Geertz's favourite rhetorical device is the metaphor.

Ambiguities and (Ir)resolutions

I conclude this thick but still necessarily thumb-nail introduction to Clifford Geertz and cultural sociology by exploring some of the deep ambiguities his thinking displays. While these ambiguities clearly energized Geertz, they also entrapped and often muddled him.

Pattern versus Process

Despite his clear understanding that actors' interpretations are mediated by cultural structures, Geertz was reluctant to devote much conceptual or empirical energy to investigating the internal patterning of this structure, its architecture, whether global or local. In 'Thick Description', for example, he writes that his subject is 'the *informal* logic of social life' (1972: 17); in the ideology essay, he suggests we should focus on the '*processes* of symbolic formation' (1972: 207); in 'Deep Play', he wants to draw our attention to how the cockfight '*catches up* ... themes ... *ordering* them *into* an encompassing structure' (1972: 443).⁸

Such passages can be read in a 'weak' and not only a 'strong' way. I mentioned earlier the allergy that Geertz experienced vis-a-vis both structuralism and functionalism, and how it can be traced, at least in some part, to intellectual-biographical concerns. With this in mind, it seems feasible to interpret such anti-structural passages, not as arguing against the existence of culture structure, but as warning about the dangers of reification. Geertz wishes to make sure that, when we employ linguistic analogies, we do not see social life simply as grammar but also as speech. He embraced Wittgenstein's insistence on language-in-use, yet neither he nor Wittgenstein denied the prior existence of language games.

Geertz is concerned about where and how he wants us to find structures, not whether or not they exist.⁹ 'Whatever, or wherever, symbol systems "in their own terms" may be', he warns, 'we gain empirical access to them by inspecting events, not by arranging abstracted entities into unified patterns' (1972: 17). Another way to say this is that, while Geertz wants social scientists

to use the concepts and methods of the humanities, he nonetheless insists on a difference. We social scientists must do our research in the field rather than sit in our studies and read written texts. As compared with such avatars of the structuralist humanities as Levi-Strauss, Roland Barthes, Hayden White, or Fredric Jameson, Geertz pursued his semiotic sensibility in situ. He was devoted to what he called ‘the “Being There” effect’ (1988: 144), to doing ethnographic, seat-of-the-pants empirical research. Even ‘the “ethnographized” history that has recently become popular’, Geertz once insisted, ‘importantly rests on such an effect, produced not, of course, by the authors’ representing themselves as having literally “been there”, but by their basing their analyses on the experiential disclosures of people who were’ (1988: 144).

Though I would defend such a weak reading, I do not wish to deny that there is a troubling ambiguity surrounding ‘Geertz and structure’. Undoubtedly, it was his discomfiture with just such a conjunctive relationship that explains why the idea of social drama began so forcefully to emerge in his middle to later work. It was, I believe, precisely in order to resolve the ambiguity of structure and agency that Geertz turned to Kenneth Burke’s idea of ‘enactment’, moving away from Erving Goffman’s more strategic sense of games to Victor Turner’s and Richard Schechner’s ideas of social drama (e.g. 1983: 27–30). It was this structural-cum-dramaturgical perspective that allowed him to create ‘Deep Play’, his so-called notes on the Balinese cockfight that became the icon of late 20th-century cultural science, much as Weber’s *Protestant Ethic* was iconic for the earlier part of that century.

The Aesthetic versus the Semiotic

Geertz sought to end the great divide between social science and humanities, and he drew his most striking conceptual and methodological ideas explicitly from the arts. There is a parallel between art and social structure. Such social facts as events, institutions, and collective actions are like art in the sense that they do their work as art does – via the imagination. This analogy between art and life stretches from the early ‘cultural systems’ essays all the way through to *Works and Lives*. Geertz maintains that, in some large part, social meaning creates its effect and affect through the aesthetic dimension. The social has an impact on the senses by way of the arrangement of form.

This proposition is, it seems to me, eminently defensible. The problem is that Geertz seems often to reduce culture structures to such aesthetic effects, posing the expressive *against* the moral and cognitive dimensions of meaning. In ‘Deep Play’, for example, he writes that ‘what we are dealing with is an art form’, an ‘aesthetic semblance’, a construction of ‘sheer appearances’ that makes social facts meaningful by making them ‘visible, tangible, graspable’, thus giving them ‘aesthetic power’ via ‘dramatic shape’ (1972: 443–4). Rather than intertwining the aesthetic dimension with the moral and cognitive, in other words, Geertz presents an either/or. One must choose between sensuous form and discursive signification. This dichotomizing demand is strikingly revealed by a passage in *Negara*, in which Geertz, ostensibly describing the Balinese, is actually presenting the theory he employs himself.

The Balinese, not only in court rituals but generally, cast their most comprehensive ideas of the way things ultimately are, and the way that men should therefore act, into immediately apprehended sensuous symbols – into a lexicon of carvings, flowers, dances, melodies, gestures, chants, ornaments, temples, postures, and masks – rather than into a discursively apprehended, ordered set of explicit ‘beliefs’. This means of expression makes any attempt to summarize those ideas a dubious business. (1981: 103)

In another paean to the Balinese, Geertz quotes Auden in his elegy to Yeats: ‘poetry makes nothing happen’, but merely ‘survives in the valley of its own saying’. In the status bloodbath of the Balinese cockfight, Geertz asserts, ‘no-one’s status really changes’ (1972: 443). Would Geertz wish for social scientists also to accept such a meditative, aestheticist stance? If culture is purely aesthetic, does it simply provide form without having effect? Only a few pages later, Geertz writes that ‘art forms generate and regenerate the very subjectivity they *pretend* only to display’ (1972: 451, italics added). This would suggest that, rather than doing nothing, even the forms of art actually do a lot. The aesthetic is triggered by discursive subjectivities, and it affects them in turn.

This ambiguity is highlighted in a revealing passage from ‘Art as a Cultural System’. First we encounter the strong statement that ‘nothing very measurable would happen to Yoruba society if carvers no longer concerned themselves with the fineness of line, or ... even with carving’. What follows just on from this is an assertion appreciably weaker. Without art, Geertz writes, Yoruba society ‘certainly ... would not fall apart’. We move finally to a significantly less aestheticized, more multidimensional logic: ‘Some things that were felt could not be said – and perhaps, after a while, might no longer even be felt’ (1983: 99). I think what Geertz ambivalently means to lead us to here is, not the identity of art and life, but rather the importance of their connection. He cautions that ‘the central connection between art and life does not lie on ... an instrumental plane’, and he immediately adds the caution that ‘it lies on a semiotic one’. Semiotic suggests linguistic and discursive ideas and beliefs. What Geertz wishes to point out, in other words, is that semiotic meanings are often expressed through aesthetic form. Such forms ‘materialize a way of experiencing’ and ‘bring a particular cast of mind out into the world of objects.’ (1983: 99).¹⁰

Theory is Irrelevant

The more Geertz became ‘Geertz’, the more he denounced abstract theorizing, often in the name of knowledge’s necessary locality. There ‘are enough general principles in the world already; the idea of pursuing a general theory is “megalomaniac”’ (1983: 4–5). This clear turning away from theory, if not turning thoroughly against it, was the animus for a critical essay I wrote on Geertz two decades ago (Alexander, 1987). When we look back over his own life and work, however, it is clear that in arguing against theory, Geertz is involved in a performative contradiction. The warp and woof of his anthropological corpus is enmeshed in theoretical ideas of the most exquisitely worked-over kind.

His ethnographies are studded with references to the first, second, and third teams of Western intellectual history over the last 2500 years. When he writes 'it is upon the capacity of theoretical ideas to set up effective analogies that their value depends', Geertz reveals his own understanding: theory is culture too.

Conclusion

In this brief piece, I have interpreted 'Clifford Geertz' as having crystallized, in his massively influential work, core methodological and theoretical elements of strong program cultural sociology. If meaning is central, then the theoretical tools that the humanities have developed to investigate art and language must become central to the human sciences more generally. Thick descriptions are powerful reconstructions, not simply detailed observations. Local knowledge is inevitably rooted in more encompassing, global meaning-structures, even while every global theme becomes not enriched but different as it emerges locally. Interests can never be objective, and extra-individual structures are both cultural and social at the same time. If structures are central, they take form only through contingent processes, and intertwining them is what performance is about. The aesthetic and the moral have autonomy, but as form and substance, or surface and depth, they are in every social moment tightly intertwined. These briefly developed insights and emphases will be energetically and intriguingly elaborated in the powerful theoretical-cum-interpretive essays that follow in this issue.

Notes

- 1 This is the ambition animating Isaac Reed's article in this issue, namely to begin to systematically lay out what a meaning-centred science of society would entail, in the wake of Dilthey and making use of Clifford Geertz and the strong program in cultural sociology.
- 2 Mats Trondman presents a powerful interpretive reconstruction of how the hermeneutical circle informed the intricacies of Geertz's empirical interpretations in his article in this issue.
- 3 For an account of Richard Rorty's work that interweaves the philosophical with the intellectual-biographical in an exemplary way, see Gross (2008).
- 4 For more on the explanatory dimension of interpretive sociology, see Reed's article in this issue.
- 5 For this perspective on Dilthey, and an earlier discussion of his relation to Geertz, see Alexander (1987).
- 6 It seems only fair to note that Parsons himself employed both kinds of terms at the same time: pattern and system, objective force and sign, language and efficient cause. In a personal note ruminating ironically on the long and ambiguous reach of Parsons' influence, Geertz once confided 'we are all "Parsonsians"'. The influence actually went both ways, however. Despite his misgivings about Geertz's cultural

turn in the early 1960s, Parsons invited Geertz to comment upon the draft manuscript of his long essay on 'The Cultural System'. Geertz was critical in his response, and the result was a much more linguistically and symbolically oriented conceptual essay.

- 7 In *The Year of Henry James* (2006), David Lodge's apologia for his earlier work *Author, Author*, the novelist and former literature professor quotes from the opening paragraph of *Wings of the Dove* 'to demonstrate how novelistic discourse can overcome the first person/third person dichotomy through the device of [what James called] "free indirect style", in which the inner voice of the point-of-view character is fused with the voice of a covert narrator: "She waited, Kate Croy, for her father to come in, but he kept her unconscionably, and there were moments at which she showed herself, in the glass over the mantel, a face positively pale with the irritation that he had brought her to the point of going away without sight of him"' (Lodge, 2006: 23).
- 8 All italics here are my own.
- 9 In his contribution in this issue, Philip Smith offers a particularly powerful argument for the centrality of structure in Geertz's cultural social science, despite his frequent, and often highly ambivalent, efforts to deny it.
- 10 In my own recent work on 'iconic consciousness', I conceptualize this as a relationship between surface form and moral depth (Alexander, forthcoming).

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