

(This obituary was published in the Proceedings of the British Academy, vol.120, 2003, pp.123-147)

Alfred Gell (1945-1997)¹

Alan Macfarlane

Alfred Gell died of cancer on January 28 1997 at the age of 51. He was at the height of his powers and widely regarded as one of the most interesting thinkers in the world in the field of the anthropology of art. He had been elected to the British Academy in 1995 and turned down a Professorship (awarded posthumously) on a number of occasions at the London School of Economics, where he held a Readership. The insightful obituaries of some of his colleagues, as well as his own frank, published remarks towards the end of his life give us an unusual opportunity to investigate the life of a highly creative and original scholar. His life and writings provide an interesting insight into the fashions and flows of one part of British thought in the later twentieth century.

In writing this obituary of Alfred Gell two major puzzles to be solved have emerged. One concerns who was Alfred Gell? The second concerns how an academic works and creates something interesting and new. Neither is an easy task. At a general level, the probing of an inner personality and cognitive process is intrinsically almost impossible. As Gell himself wrote, ‘ the cognitive processes of any mind, especially over a whole biographical career, are inaccessible private experiences which leave only the most undecipherable traces.’² In relation to Gell himself I have certain disadvantages in addressing these questions. I did not know Gell at all personally. I have little overlap in terms of competence, his principal field being Melanesia, though I do have an interest in his second fieldwork area among the Muria Gonds of Andhra Pradesh. Likewise I only have a partial overlap in terms of topic of concern, though I am interested in technology and recently in the history of art, and particularly in the ways in which artists and writers work. This, plus the objectivity of being an historian as well as an anthropologist, and someone outside his circle of close acquaintances, may give me certain compensating advantages.

The task is one of detection. There are various clues which, to use the approach of one of his favourite characters, Sherlock Holmes, allow us to reconstruct something about this interesting mind and person, particularly with the help of his own revealing

¹ I would particularly like to thank two people for their help in preparing this obituary. Dr. Su Dagleish prepared a short early draft and her comments on Gell’s more recent work on the anthropology of art has been included almost unchanged. Dr. Eric Hirsch provided the three obituaries which are cited in the notes and also conducted the interviews and the editing without which this obituary would have been impossible. Both he and Drs. Stephen Hugh-Jones have kindly commented on the draft of this obituary and Dr. Gilbert Lewis provided some personal background information of a valuable kind.

² Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford, 1998), p.236, henceforth cited as Gell, *Agency*.

comments made in the last few months of his life and published in the introduction to his posthumously published essays on the *Art of Anthropology* (Athlone Press, 1999).

Family and school

Gell was born on June 12 1945. His real names, according to the obituary in the *Guardian* [4 February 1997] were Antony Francis, but at his public school he was renamed 'Alfred' by his friends, according to one of them. Gell describes himself on several occasions as of 'bourgeois' background and when describing why he felt hypocritical about aligning himself too closely with anti-colonialism referred to the fact 'my ancestors were all colonial officials, soldiers, and even missionaries and bishops.'³

His parents are the late Professor Philip (an eminent immunologist) and Mrs. Susan Gell. One of their main influences on him was through an interest in art and drawing. 'Both my parents drew. My mother was a draughtswoman trained in the art of doing the drawings that go with archaeological expeditions and my father was an amateur artist, and so the materials were always present in our house. When I was a small child, I entertained myself by drawing mostly, as many small children do. I don't say I was a brilliant child artist but I would produce huge series of pictures. We had comics, and one week the comic started a big story about how some Vikings landed on a piece of rural Sussex... I was inspired to produce hundreds of pictures of Viking feats...'⁴ He wrote that 'for me the graphic channel of expression is as natural – in fact, more natural – than writing.'⁵

We gain other glimpses of his childhood interests in occasional asides in his essays, for example we hear of Alfred's reverence as an eleven-year-old for a matchstick model of Salisbury Cathedral. It was also at home and at school that he absorbed a love of music. It has been suggested in one of the obituaries that 'It is perhaps no coincidence that of all the musicians Alfred admired it was Schubert that he felt most passionate about. Schubert died at the age of 31, a modest man during his brief life...'⁶

At Bryanston boarding school he met Stephen Hugh-Jones and Jonathan Oppenheimer, friends and students of anthropology, with whom he maintained close ties until his death. There Alfred developed his interest and skill in the practice of wit as a medium of social communication. He told Eric Hirsch in an interview that he became part of 'an intellectual elite founded on wit, the ability to make people laugh...It was a form of mild verbal aggression, a sort of verbal competition, one-upmanship, the desire to be top dog.... I think I probably carried a lot of that sort of adolescent competition to, in some ways, be wittier than the next person into the academic work that I do.'⁷

³ Alfred Gell, *The Art of Anthropology; Essays and Diagrams* (Athlone Press, 1999), edited by Eric Hirsch, henceforth referred to as Gell, *Art*.

⁴ Gell, *Art*, pp.26-7.

⁵ Gell, *Art*, pp.8-9

⁶ Eric Hirsch, 'Obituary of Alfred Gell' in *American Anthropologist*, 101(1), p. 152, henceforth referred to as Hirsch, *Obituary*.

⁷ Eric Hirsch in the foreword to Gell, *Art*, p.ix.

Cambridge as an undergraduate.

Gell read archaeology and anthropology at Trinity College, Cambridge. He gives a glimpse of his first year in the joint course and the way in which it strengthened his earlier interest in visual representations. ‘...we did archaeology, anthropology and physical anthropology, as well. And of course both archaeology and physical anthropology involved drawing skulls and stones. The first book of anthropology that I studied was *Habitat, Economy and Society* ...by Darryl Forde, and I copied out all the pictures in it.’⁸

A second major effect of Cambridge was to re-enforce his desire to impress by his wit. ‘I was introduced to seminar-giving by Meyer Fortes (c.1966). He had the excellent idea of teaching the Cambridge third-year anthropology students by means of a two-hour seminar, during which the students had to give papers of at least half an hour’s duration, if not three-quarters of an hour. I had to give my presentation on M.Meggitt’s ‘Walbiri Kinship’ – an exceptionally complicated book about Walbiri aborigines’ [kinship system]... This was quite a trial, but Fortes was a most sympathetic seminar chairman.... Since I knew that my audience would be bored unless I took great care over my presentation and made it as interesting as possible, I took enormous pains over it.... In the event, I was thrilled to the core by the experience of expounding... [this ethnography] to my peers. As a rather shy boy, a bit lost in “fast” Cambridge undergraduate society, I found that I seemed to possess a distinct edge when it came to this particular (very specialized) form of public speaking, and that I could get an audience not just to respect my intelligence in this context, but also to like me personally.’⁹

He paints a picture of his final year and the curious in-fighting that was going on in Cambridge at that time. His supervisor during his last year was Andrew Strathern, ‘who was responsible for encouraging me to become a Melanesianist... But although I greatly liked, and learnt a great deal, from Andrew Strathern, I have to say that Leach was probably the anthropologist who influenced me most during my initial stages. My undergraduate view of anthropology was simple and dualist. Lévi-Strauss was God, Leach was his vicar on earth, and Meyer Fortes, I am ashamed to say, was the functionalist Satan, whom we structuralists spurned and derided, and his side-kick was Dr Jack Goody, from whose lectures, supposedly filled with calumnies against structuralism, we absented ourselves lest we be contaminated.’¹⁰

The London School of Economics: phase one.

Gell then went to the Department of Anthropology at the London School of Economics where he was required to do a taught M.Phil. before commencing on a doctorate. This course further re-enforced his love of ‘seminar culture’. The teaching for the M.Phil. in anthropology was conducted in ‘seminar’ format and we ‘were also admitted to the famous “Friday Seminar” which had been going, non-stop, since Malinowski’s day. This seminar was run by Raymond Firth in a most excitingly autocratic fashion; all those in attendance were assumed to be able to comment intelligently, and would be asked to do so if the chairman saw fit. Since I never knew

⁸ Gell, *Art*, p.27

⁹ Gell, *Art*, pp.3-4

¹⁰ Gell, *Art*, p.4

when Raymond might ask ‘Well, what do *you* think, Mr Gell?’ it was absolutely necessary to pay attention both to the paper and to the subsequent discussion, on pain of possible public humiliation. I still retain the ability to listen to an hour’s paper and 50 minutes of discussion without lapses of concentration, as a result of this early, invaluable, training.’¹¹

He was sufficiently good at seminar presentations to be asked to give a seminar to the major departmental seminar. to the grown-up Friday Seminar. ‘For me, this was an absolutely epochal event, and I never worked harder than on the preparation of my paper for this occasion, which concerned Melanesian “Big-Man” politics. It was not that I simply wanted to avoid a fiasco; I was much more ambitious than that. My aim was to seduce my audience, to make them admire me just as if I had been a *débutante* dancer going on stage. My presentation of self had to captivate just as much as my words..... Anyway, I was in luck. My paper went swimmingly, and even won a prize, the very first Firth Prize for the best postgraduate paper of the year.’¹²

His major teacher and thesis supervisor was Anthony Forge, later to become a leading theorist of art and particularly Melanesian art. ‘Although I now take positions which are, in many ways, opposed to my teacher’s, I acquired from him the conviction that the study of art raises some of the most interesting problems in anthropology.’¹³

He went to do his fieldwork among the Umeda peoples of New Guinea in 1969. The resulting monograph became a classic. Maurice Bloch has written that the book ‘combines one of the finest structuralist analyses of New Guinea ritual and art ever produced, with a robustly anti-structuralist argument about the non-arbitrary nature of symbols and words’.¹⁴ Gilbert Lewis met his External examiner, George Milner (Professor of Oceanic Linguistics at S.O.A.S.) shortly after he had been the external examiner for Alfred’s thesis – ‘he was full of precise praise for the imaginative brilliance of the thesis he had just been reading...’ Peter Loizos who was managing editor of the monograph series in which it was published described [personal communication] how it was absolutely perfect (including the striking illustrations and diagrams by Gell) when given to him. Nothing needed to be changed.

Gell himself is, in characteristic fashion, wryly modest about his achievement. ‘I wrote my monograph on the Umedas in 1972-3. This was presented as a “structural analysis” in the Leach/Lévi-Strauss mode, and seemed very fashionable when it came out, but only for a little while, because “sixties structuralism” was already in decline. I like to believe that the attention *Metamorphosis of the Cassowaries* received from other anthropologists was due to its literary ingenuity rather than its theoretical message, which was really quite out of tune with the times.’¹⁵

The fieldwork for this thesis was clearly very tough. Indeed Hirsch suggests that when Gell went down with malaria in New Guinea he ‘felt he had come very close to death. From that time until his actual, tragic death from cancer some 28 years later at

¹¹ Gell, *Art*, p.5

¹² Gell, *Art*, p.5

¹³ Gell, *Art*, p.8

¹⁴ Quoted in Hirsch, *Obituary*, p.152

¹⁵ Gell, *Art*, p.7

the age of 51, he had the sense of living on borrowed time.’¹⁶ His only re-visit was to help with making a film about Umeda ritual, the ‘Red Bowman’. Peter Loizos described this as a ‘very solid, scholarly and valuable archival film’ which is an important record and adjunct to the book. [personal communication]

The interlude: Australia and India.

After completing his thesis Gell went to a lecturing position in Sussex, where he met his future wife, the fellow anthropologist Simeran. He was recruited to the Australian National University in 1974 with the help of Anthony Forge. During the next ten years he attempted to shift to a new theme for study and to a new ethnographic area.

‘It was as at this time [1970’s] that I conceived the idea of writing an anthropology of time, a project on which I squandered an inordinate amount of – time. The whole effort would have been wasted but for the fact that my manuscript, which had been rejected by Cambridge University Press in 1984...’¹⁷ It was eventually published in much revised form by in 1992 as *The Anthropology of Time*. This was a book in which he asked how time impinged on people’s consciousness, how societies dealt with time, whether time can be considered as a ‘resource’ to be saved or spent. He explored the theories of various authorities on time, from Durkheim to Bourdieu, and considered four main theoretical approaches. These were those of developmental psychology, symbolic anthropology, ‘economic’ theories of time in social geography and phenomenological theories. He then presented his own model of social/cognitive time. It is a very clever work, but has never caught on among his fellow academics in the same way as his later work on art.

The widening of his ethnographic area occurred through the accident of marrying Simeran. Again his own wry account of what happened is revealing. ‘Simeran went to do fieldwork in India among the Muria [Gonds of Madhya Pradesh, India, in 1977-8], and I went along as the spouse....Not having any grant, I had nothing in particular to study, so I could choose myself. I must say, it was a very, very nice fieldwork indeed, not having any research grant, not having any research project. And so I collected material on the markets simply because the market was one of the most interesting social occasions which happened very week, and it was really wonderful. I loved the market, and I liked the traders and the hustle and bustle of it all – very beautiful it was, exotic.’¹⁸

On the basis of his work he wrote several insightful essays. For example there was ‘The Market Wheel: Symbolic Aspects of an Indian Tribal Market’ which was heavily influenced by Geertz’s famous essay on the ‘Balinese cock fight’. And there was the essay which became the basis for his last public appearance. ‘In 1977-8, when Simeran and I were visiting Jagdalpur during our first fieldwork....We’d been hearing, in the village, stories about this great massacre and the death of the Raja of Bastar in 1966... I was very intrigued from that moment onwards about the idea of a Raja of Bastar and his death and why it caused so much panic in the countryside as it

¹⁶ Hirsch, *Obituary*, p.152

¹⁷ Gell, *Art*, pp.7-8

¹⁸ Gell, *Art*, pp.12-3

did.’¹⁹ So he worked up the material and gave it as the Frazer Lecture in Cambridge in November 1997. He describes its aim thus. ‘So what I was really working towards, I suppose, was something like a Sahlinesian picture of history in which history is people replaying the categories which had been handed down to them from the distant past.’²⁰

His other motive for writing and delivering this lecture is equally revealing about his views. As he put it, ‘it also provides me with an opportunity to do something which I really like to do – which is to take the piss out of these development people, particularly in India, who think that the poor downtrodden tribals have got anything to thank them for. In India most of the petty government officials are pretty much corrupt. But they all nonetheless think that because they have got a bit of education that gives them the right to rip off ordinary country folk and despise them at the same time. They don’t do it in the name of self-interest, which would be quite reasonable in my view. They do it in the name of “development” and “progress”. So I’ve always been very much against development and progress...’²¹

He returned to India many times. He and Simeran were advisors for a BBC documentary on the Gonds, but refused to let their names be included in the credits of what is widely regarded as an intrusive unsatisfactory film. ‘He leaves many friends and relatives there [in India].’²²

The London School of Economics: phase two.

Gell returned to the L.S.E. as a Reader in 1979. It clearly took him some years to return to his earlier enthusiasm, for he describes on several occasions how the years between 1977 and 1984 were his ‘wilderness years’. He was still trying to sort out his ideas on time, uncertain of how to proceed further.

It is clear that the ambience of the L.S.E. gave him tremendous support in re-launching his career. It was the ideal place for him to be. It had a lively ‘seminar culture’ which drew the best out of him. His colleagues were stimulating, especially Maurice Bloch with whom he shared certain interests in performance and language. Above all the Department was extremely supportive. In many Departments in the country he would have been forced to undertake the usual administrative tasks which weigh down most academics and often interfere with their creativity – Chairing the Department and Faculty, Senior Examiner and so on. On the one or two occasions when Gell was asked to do this it became plain that he seemed temperamentally incapable of performing the task. Consequently he was spared almost all such tasks. He recognized that he was not playing his part in this way and this was one of the reasons he refused to be up-graded to a Professorship. As Hirsch writes, ‘Administrative burdens were tasks he greatly avoided and which explains why – with his consent – he was never promoted to a professorship during his lifetime.’²³

¹⁹ Gell, *Art*, p.22

²⁰ Gell, *Art*, p.23

²¹ Gell, *Art*, p.23

²² Hirsch, *Obituary*, p.153

²³ Hirsch, *Obituary*, p.154

His colleagues were also extremely tolerant of his tendency to take on a number of Ph.D. students whom neither he nor the Department were really equipped to teach, largely because he could not say 'no'. Again, however, this was at considerable cost to others. He was a good teacher and inspiring lecturer, and this was obviously what he enjoyed most.

While the Department provided the context, it is difficult to know exactly what brought him back to the subject to which he would make such a major contribution, the anthropology of art. Clearly one special book and moment was when, according to Hirsch, 'during 1984 Alfred read for the first time [E.H.Gombrich's] *The Sense of Order* (1979), which enabled him to see clearly the connection between the cognitive effects of patterned images and the potent cognitive processes informing them.'²⁴

But this is only one small clue. In order to understand his progress and later work better we need to abandon the strictly chronological approach and consider several important themes and influences. We need to go to the under-ground rivers or, to change the metaphor, to see him reflected in other mirrors.

Some major influences on his thought

In tracing the major influences on Gell's academic development we notice three ways in which certain thinkers affected him. One was as a role model, someone to emulate or outdo in general. Secondly he paid considerable attention to the way in which people wrote or otherwise communicated their ideas, their style and method of presentation. Thirdly there was the content of their ideas, their methodology and substantive ideas.

The first major influence on Gell, the anthropologist Edmund Leach, shows all three types of influence mixed together. Gell's 'hero-worshipping' attitude at Cambridge has been mentioned, and he continues by assessing the influence as follows. 'The papers "Rethinking anthropology", "Genesis as myth" and "The legitimation of Solomon", provided the model for my literary activity from the start. People complain about Leach's scratchy prose style; but I hear Leach's authentic and unforgettable drawl behind his printed words, and the whole text comes alive. Leach's style has the supreme virtue of allowing his wit, his sheer cleverness, to emerge fully; the absence of shading, delicacy and embellishment only contribute to this central purpose. I, on the other hand, was more interested than Leach in prose as a literary medium.'²⁵

Writing of his essay on the Umeda dance, Gell suggested that 'In a way [this article] is about the way I was introduced into anthropology by Edmund Leach, because one thing you'll notice with the mask analysis and the dance analysis is that they can be done on this rubber sheeting. Leach had this idea that you could put social structure on rubber sheeting and twist it around. Well, it's that idea basically. I think that idea (which comes in *Rethinking Anthropology*) had a very, very powerful long-term effect on me, so that whenever I come across bodies of data which do seem to be

²⁴ Hirsch, *Obituary*, p.154

²⁵ Gell, *Art*, p.6

susceptible to being shown as a series of twistings and stretchings on rubber, I automatically do so.’²⁶

Gell’s interest in prose style partly ‘came from my early and assiduous reading of Lévi-Strauss, a much more refined prose stylist than Leach.. I still think that Lévi-Strauss is the greatest of anthropologists, and that he will never be overtaken, however long our discipline remains in existence – his only rival being Malinowski, a taste for whom I acquired only later. Lévi-Strauss’ urbane and convoluted style inspired me greatly, and it is fair to say that at the outset of my career I wanted to produce ‘Leachian’ displays of hard-hitting anthropological wit, wrapped up in Lévi-Straussian gravitas and mellifluousness.’²⁷ Several of the essays in the final collection, as well as some of his shorter reviews give examples of what he was aiming at.

When he went to the L.S.E. and during his fieldwork this structural influence was supplemented by another. ‘I also discovered phenomenology, or to be more precise, phenomenological social theory and psychological theory. My guides were Alfred Schutz and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose works I took with me to New Guinea when I went into the field in 1969. I made a very thorough study of Schutz’s collected papers, and *The Phenomenology of Perception*, not least because I had little else to read and much time on my hands, immured in my mosquito-net. Exactly why I became interested in phenomenology is rather a puzzle to me.’²⁸

The next wave to break over anthropology, in the mid 1970s, when Gell was at the A.N.U., hardly affected him. He describes his negative attitude in his characteristic way. ‘Resurgent Marxism was in the air; but I had no left-wing leanings and I never believed that anthropology was a force to set the world to rights or undo the effects of colonialism.’ Given his bourgeois and colonial ancestors, he could not feel himself to be a plausible anti-colonialist. ‘I never had the slightest feeling that I could be “engaged” or “committed” or identify with the subjects of anthropology, if only because my middle-class income – even an academic salary – was so much greater, and cost me so much less sweat to obtain, than the incomes of Umedas or, later, Muria Gonds. I have never understood how bourgeois like myself can consider themselves the class allies of third world peasants, since it seems to me that we are all just walking, breathing examples of the results of their exploitation. All that people like me can do in the third world is watch and listen sympathetically, and maybe form a few personal relationships which, in the nature of things, are without significance so far as the wider historical relationships between nations are concerned. The business of bourgeois anthropologists like me is only to produce texts – or give seminars – directed towards a reception of other anthropologists and interested (metropolitan) parties.’²⁹

He then continues to explain what he read and who influenced him at this period. ‘Because the anthropological Marxism of the 1970s repelled me, before I read Bourdieu and was reconciled, I was forced, more or less, to spend the decade interesting myself in non-anthropological studies, particularly philosophy and

²⁶ Gell, *Art*, p.16

²⁷ Gell, *Art*, p.6

²⁸ Gell, *Art*, p.6

²⁹ Gell, *Art*, p.7

psychology.’³⁰ During the later 1970’s and early 1980’s ‘The most important influence on my theoretical outlook during this period [1977-1984] was Bourdieu. Only on the surface am I a Bourdieu critic. Actually, I read Bourdieu obsessively, and with unstinted admiration for his dialectical skill. I think of Bourdieu as just as much one of my masters as Leach, Lévi-Strauss, and the phenomenologists Schutz, Merleau-Ponty and Husserl.’³¹

The final writer who influenced him both stylistically and in approach was a surprising one. He describes how in the early 1980’s, as the background to writing his essay on ‘The technology of enchantment and the enchantment of technology’, he ‘started to read Malinowski properly, especially *Coral Gardens* which I had not even opened before. I think that I became very much influenced by Malinowski stylistically, following this immersion, and that my writing became simpler and more expressive as a result... Malinowski was a supreme literary stylist whose elegant texts (along with Evans-Pritchard’s) should be imitated by every anthropological beginner.’³²

He was also influenced by Malinowski theoretically. As Hirsch explains, ‘he was able to see how Malinowski’s study of gardening magic could be interpreted as a form of social technology that works through means of enchantment. Alfred discerned resonances between these verbal icons of enchantment and material forms such as the Kula prowboards carved to have powerful and persuasive effects upon Kula competitors. Almost at once this provided an emancipation from semiotic structuralism.’³³

A final important strand was work in the history of art. We have already seen that the work of Ernest Gombrich proved to be a turning point in 1984 and there were others. For instance, Dr. Gilbert Lewis remembered meeting Gell ‘when I happened to be carrying a book in my hand (Edgar Wind’s *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance*) which Alfred spotted immediately. It was one of his favourite books on the history of art, read more than once.’ [personal communication]

Gell’s interest in the history of art, his early love of drawing and painting, takes us to another deep influence, which was works of art themselves. Although he clearly liked the great masters, Titian especially, it was modern artists and particularly Duchamp about whom he explicitly wrote. He describes in relation to his essay ‘Vogel’s net: Traps as Artworks and Artworks as Traps’, that this ‘derives from an interest in Duchamp and conceptual art which I have maintained since the 1970s when I first studied Duchamp’s notes for “The Bride stripped Bare by Her Bachelors Even” as part of my “Time” project. It has always seemed to me a pity that the anthropology of art has only joined forces with “modern” art in the most stupid, reactionary way...’³⁴

This love of Duchamp and what it meant to him is again usefully summarized by Hirsch. ‘At one level, Duchamp sought to challenge the prevailing Western aesthetic

³⁰ Gell, *Art*, p.7

³¹ Gell, *Art*, p.8

³² Gell, *Art*, p.8

³³ Hirsch, *Obituary*, p.154

³⁴ Gell, *Art*, p.18

conventions of representation by famously exhibiting a urinal – a “readymade”, as he called it. What attracted Alfred and countless others to Duchamp’s masterpiece was the intentional complexity it embodied and its puzzling qualities: the actual choice of artifact among those possible, how it was physically displayed (i.e. in a manner so that it could not be used), its arcane but potent signature (“R.Mutt”), and so on. It was through Duchamp’s attempt to dissolve art as we know it that Alfred glimpsed the outlines of his theory: everything according to Duchamp could be art and Alfred rephrased this in anthropological terms as how it was possible that “art” could be in anything.’³⁵

His audience: seminar culture

Gell’s work cannot be understood without considering the audience he was addressing. Here we come to a number of revealing passages where he describes what he was trying to do. In the introduction to his posthumous essays, Gell writes: ‘All the essays collected in this volume began life as texts intended to be delivered out loud to audiences, mostly at seminars. They are not really essays for reading so much as scripts to be performed.’ He then gives an amusing account of the abrasive yet sympathetic setting of an (ideal-type) British academic seminar.³⁶ He comments that: ‘The point is that the seminar is a social occasion, a game, an exchange, an ordeal, an initiation. To one of a naturally social disposition, to hear a paper in a seminar is intrinsically much more interesting than to read the same paper in cold blood, because one’s social proclivities are excited as well as one’s strictly academic or intellectual interests. I confess to being a social animal of this type. Consequently, it is much more exciting for me to write a paper for presentation at a seminar than it is to write for an imaginary reader, as one does when writing a book. Books do not give anything like the feedback that one gets from seminars.’³⁷

We have seen the ways in which this skill and interest developed out of his experiences at school, Cambridge and in the Firth and other seminars at the L.S.E. He wrote that ‘while I never believed that I was better at “anthropology” than my more intelligent age-mates, I always prided myself on giving better performances in the specific “seminar” setting. So, since then, I have concentrated on working towards particular ‘performances’, rather than concentrating, as perhaps I should have done, on the development of anthropological theory in a more general sense. What I have always wanted to produce was the “ideal” seminar paper for reading out loud (rather than some specific advance in anthropological knowledge).’³⁸

For those who never attended any of these occasions, it is reassuring to learn that he was largely successful. According to Hirsch his ‘papers were a combination of wit, tightly reasoned argument, and creative iconoclasm that drew the listener in and enabled her/him to gain novel insights...’³⁹

His method of exploring and communicating ideas; the visual dimension

³⁵ Hirsch, *Obituary*, p.154

³⁶ Gell, *Art*, pp.1-2

³⁷ Gell, *Art*, p.2

³⁸ Gell, *Art*, pp.5-6

³⁹ Hirsch, *Obituary*, p.152

Gell wore very thick spectacles for short-sightedness and read texts or examined objects with his face a few inches from the object of his attention. He also had other problems with his eyes in his middle life which nearly made him blind. He was reputedly saved from this by some of the earliest laser surgery performed in England. The curious nature of his eyes, the particular intensity of his seeing tiny objects when held close, all this seem to be connected both with his interests in visuality, his personality and his artistic abilities.

We have noted his parents and his own interest in graphic and other representation. He wrote that the *‘Metamorphosis of the Cassowaries* is dominated by this mode of expression, and is really an “art” book as much as a “ritual” book. The same could be said of my subsequent monograph on Polynesian tattooing.’⁴⁰ He furthermore described how he thought. ‘When I write, I see pictures in my head and I write accordingly; the diagrams come first and the text later. There are many ‘diagram based’ papers in the present collection [Art of Anthropology]. Extensive use of pictures and diagrams is also part of effective seminar culture, since giving the audience something to look at, as well as to listen to, makes it far easier to ensure their concentration over the full hour.’⁴¹

He deeply appreciated diagrams and visual representations in anthropology. ‘When I was struggling during my first year as an undergraduate when I first tried to read *Les Structures Élémentaires de la Parente*, I seem to remember that the diagrams in Lévi-Strauss were one of the few bits that I could understand....So I was always very diagram conscious, and I’ve always appreciated really good diagrams. For example, the diagrams in Robin Fox’s book *Kinship and Marriage* are *superb* pieces of clear graphic expression.... The diagrams in Fortes are very interesting. There are innumerable diagrams in Leach’s *Rethinking Anthropology*, many of which have a very, very clarifying effect on the text.’⁴²

He also had more theoretical reasons for this interest in non-textual representations. ‘It is said that 95 per cent of the information which we make use of is originally derived from visual sources. Yet anthropology as a business consists of the production of texts in propositional form. There is a basic contradiction here in the sense that anthropology is a very wordy business, yet the subject-matter of anthropology is – not always, but often – cognition or people’s thought processes, or how people perceive and understand the world. If one wanted to know how X perceived and understood the world, one would have to know what they had seen and what they had made of what they had seen, rather than what they had thought in words and what they were prepared to express in propositional form..... When I am writing papers I generally start with an image, even in those papers which don’t have any diagram as such. For example, the “Swing’s paper” starts with an image of somebody being swung. The fact that one constructs a paper out of a seam of life which is imaginable primarily as a visual image – or in the case of “the language of the forest” as a movement – is significant.....I habitually think in terms of images, and of bringing images to things...’⁴³

⁴⁰ Gell, *Art*, p.9

⁴¹ Gell, *Art*, p.9

⁴² Gell, *Art*, pp.9-10

⁴³ Gell, *Art*, pp.10-11

Discovery and originality

The *Guardian* obituary by Eric Hirsch is headed ‘The art of discovery’. This takes us to the heart of what is interesting about his life and work for, according to those who knew him well ‘Alfred had a creativity, a fluidity and agility which we will remember...’⁴⁴ Since creativity and the conditions of discovering new things are so intriguing, yet so difficult to investigate, how are we to proceed in this case? One way to approach the matter is through someone else who may have influenced Gell. We are told that ‘Sherlock Holmes was one of Alfred’s favourite literary characters, and it is perhaps no accident that he deploys the method of a sleuth searching for privileged zones of clarity in an opaque reality.’⁴⁵

The idea of approaching his creative art of discovery by analogy to the famous sleuth was developed by one of his Ph.D. students, Dr. Chris Pinney at the Memorial Celebration of his life held at the LSE on March 13, 1997. Hirsch summarizes his comparison. ‘There are many points of similarity in their method “for a mixture of imagination and reality” (as Holmes once put it), and a combination of breadth and the “oblique uses of knowledge” characterized both their intellectual practices. Holmes’s assertion that “little things are infinitely the most important” would have gained Alfred’s assent. Seeing Alfred peering at some object of illustration in a book recalls Holmes’s voracious specialism; Holmes’s knowledge of pipes... (etc) were paralleled by Alfred’s knowledge of tattoos, and of rat traps, giraffe traps, and fish traps along with an endless list of other recondite inhabitants of what Holmes called the “brain-attic”. For Alfred, as also for Holmes, to a great mind nothing was trivial.’⁴⁶

The obsession with gathering vast amounts of apparently irrelevant materials in preparation for his task is delightfully described by Gell as follows. ‘I’m interested in everything! I’m interested in the entire contents of the *Scientific American* every time it comes out. I read the ones about the sensory equipment of spiders and the ones about escalating health care costs in America, and so on and so forth... I’m not more interested in one bit of than I am in another and my interest in science and indeed the arts or anything else is simply that they provide a series of ingredients which can be combined – with luck – by means of pattern-building intuitions, to provide some kind of particular counter-intuitive, or apparently counter-intuitive solution to some kind of problem which can be stated in a fairly restricted sort of way.’⁴⁷

While he was interested in everything, it is clear that he also particularly hoarded specific materials. Thus from 1984 ‘he gathered together data – largely from published and archival sources – on artworks, both ‘primitive’ and ‘modern’.⁴⁸ How these and other materials were retained, whether in files or other ways, and what indexing and retrieval systems he developed we do not learn, unlike the case of Holmes whose system of files and his lack of enthusiasm at the boring task of filing is well described by Watson in ‘The Five Orange Pips’.

⁴⁴ Eric Hirsch, Suzanne Kuchler and Chris Pinney, ‘Obituary of Alfred Gell’, *Anthropology Today*, vol. 13, no.2, April 1997, p. 23, hereafter cited as *A.T. Obituary*.

⁴⁵ Hirsch, *Obituary*, p.152

⁴⁶ Hirsch, *Obituary*, p.153

⁴⁷ Gell, *Art*, p.24

⁴⁸ *A.T. Obituary*, p.23

The essence of creative discovery is to make counter-intuitive connections, to see hidden links and patterns which no-one has discovered before. This was something which Gell (and Holmes) were well aware of and it is worth quoting passages where Gell explains what he was trying to do. ‘Overall, what I’m interested in is producing something which is counter-intuitive – all that I ever wanted to do was to produce articles and papers which would make people sit up – and to do that the last thing that one wants really to be interested in is some Big Subject.’⁴⁹ This is what particularly excited him about Lévi-Strauss. ‘What is interesting is what is counter-intuitive... So the pursuit of the counter-intuitive is always more interesting. Lévi-Strauss is a great master of the counter-intuitive... [in relation to analysis of myths] Lévi-Strauss manages like a magician through manipulation of the data to turn what is apparently arbitrary into something which is very, very orderly.’⁵⁰

This led Gell to claim that he was a post-modernist, before the term was invented, ‘in the sense that I wasn’t really interested in actually, as it were, ‘advancing the subject’ in any particular way. All that I was interested in doing was producing a certain *frisson*, a certain artistic effect which could be achieved by taking a random collection of objects which could be made to fit together in an interesting way.’ This, of course, reminds anthropologists of Lévi-Strauss’s writings on the ‘bricoleur’ who mixes unlikely things together. One example among thousands in Gell’s work would be in chapter 6 (on traps) in his *Essays*. ‘...what I want to be able to do is to produce an essay which allows me to combine Danto, the extraordinarily metropolitan New York Philosophy of Art Professor, with the Pygmy theory of why chimpanzees are too clever for their own good. It’s the possibility of creating these conjunctions and unexpected connections that interest me.’⁵¹

This is why Gell loved conversations and seminars. ‘Seminar culture obviously depends heavily on the pursuit of the counter-intuitive, in that it’s saying the counter-intuitive proposition which is going to make people sit up and listen.’⁵² It was an urge that did not just arise from a desire to discover. This desire to be subversive, to take the contrary, sometimes absurd, position was also, he claimed, something temperamental. ‘I’ve always been on the side of the “language is not arbitrary” position. Well, first of all, because it is counter-intuitive. They’re the underdogs, the people who say that language is not arbitrary. And of course, I’m a natural supporter of the underdog, partly because it’s in my nature, and also because it was generally subversive to structural linguistics...’⁵³

The connection between wit, surprise and creativity was one which always interested him. ‘A book which impressed me a great deal when I read it was Koestler’s book on wit and science, in which he argues that humour arises through the clash of two contradictory frames of reference, or paradigms. New knowledge is always subversive of old knowledge because it involves this clash of what he calls frames of reference. I think that in so far as I had a method, I modelled it on

⁴⁹ Gell, *Art*, p.23

⁵⁰ Gell, *Art*, p.25

⁵¹ Gell, *Art*, pp.24-5

⁵² Gell, *Art*, p.25

⁵³ Gell, *Art*, p.21

Koestler's notion of the conflict of frames of reference, so that the aim was to be productively witty.'⁵⁴

It is therefore no coincidence that 'During these last months Alfred said that his next project would have been concerned with the anthropology of humour. He was critical of anthropology's silence in the face of humour's disruptive potentiality. The extreme seriousness that dominated anthropological writing was, he felt, hardly liberating. Since his youth he had been impressed with the Victorian novelist George Meredith and in particular *The Egoist*, which is Meredith's most extreme expression of a theme in his work: the defeat of egoism by the power of Comedy.'⁵⁵

In the draft introduction to *The Art of Anthropology* he wrote: 'I find that I am drawn, inexorably, towards a new, and possibly difficult theme: namely, comedy, and its status as an anthropological muse.... I must observe that, for me, the attraction of anthropology has never been its passionate, tragic, or even serious nature, but its potential for comedy. If I had been a novelist, I would have tried to write comic novels....'⁵⁶

The anthropology of art.

While Gell will be remembered as the author of the classic ethnography on the Umeda and a splendid survey of theories of time, it is the work on art and anthropology, undertaken during the last twelve years of his short life, which will determine his wider reputation. This consists of three books. The first, and only one published during his life was *Wrapping in Images: Tattooing in Polynesia* (1992). According to Hirsch, this was 'the most comprehensive study written on Polynesian tattooing. As with other "artworks", tattooing was part of institutional complexes but simultaneously a part of cognitive operations: Alfred felicitously traced the general power of tattoos to "catch" while being locally interpreted in ways symptomatic of specific institutional forms.'⁵⁷ According to the same author, this 'proposed that tattoos are a "second skin" preserving the integrity of the individual in the face of cosmological threats of generalised personal dissolution. It is now acknowledged as the definitive text in the field...' (*Guardian* obituary).

The second in order of writing, though not of publication, was a collection of his essays, mostly given as seminar papers and lectures, published in 1999 as *The Art of Anthropology; Essays and Diagrams* and edited by Eric Hirsch. The final work was *Art and Agency, An Anthropological Theory* (1998). Although containing earlier thoughts, and particularly relying on ideas in his most famous essay on the 'Technology of Enchantment', two-thirds of this was written in a three-week burst of writing during the Easter break of 1996, shortly before a terminal cancer was diagnosed. Although he made 'determined efforts of body and will to complete the draft and assemble notes for its revision.... The book as published is essentially this first draft...'⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Gell, *Art*, p. ix

⁵⁵ Hirsch, *Obituary*, p.154

⁵⁶ Gell, *Art*, p.xi

⁵⁷ Hirsch, *Obituary*, p.154

⁵⁸ Steven Hooper, 'An Anthropologist Looks at Art', *Art History*, vol.23, no.2, June 2000, p. 301

Since the ideas have not been refined and made explicit, they are not as clear as they would have been with revisions, but here are some clues to the themes in this later work. One overview is as follows.⁵⁹

Gell makes frequent use of the terms ‘index’ and ‘agency’. At the beginning, he states that he has provisionally defined the ‘anthropology of art’ as the theoretical study of social relations in the vicinity of objects, or indexes, mediating social agency, and that furthermore, art objects are the equivalent of persons, or more precisely, they are social agents.⁶⁰

He contended that the anthropological method of enquiring into a society enables anthropology to view the art of a society in a more micro-cosmic fashion than sociologists and art historians when they are making similar studies. It was his view that those who concern themselves with the history of art or sociology of a society, approach that society’s creativity by studying its institutions which provide the context for the production and circulation of art. Anthropology, he wrote, which is working in a social context different from the Western world, concerns itself with: ‘... the network of relationships surrounding particular artworks in specific interactive settings.’⁶¹ He believed that in non-Western societies, ‘institutions’ may have a place in a society’s production of artworks, but they may not necessarily be concerned with the artistic process, *per se*, but rather with the production of artworks for specialized purposes, be they religious, magical or political.

This point of view serves to highlight the ever-present question: what exactly is the Western world’s definition of art? It also raises the question: whether what is being produced in societies which differ from the West, is in fact art? In the West, the desire or need for a work comes from society’s ‘institutions’, be they museums, art galleries or the Western art market. They are thus providing the impetus for a work to be created. It is expected that this work will be an expression of the individual artist’s personal experience and point of view. However, in the second case, work is carried out to serve the requirements of a society’s ‘institution’ which has a religious, magical or political function. This, from a Western point of view, removes from the process the creative individual’s need for self-expression. The artist is expected to produce a work which is appropriate to the requirements of that society and its ‘institutions’.

However, in recent times, the West has inserted itself into this situation. Much ethnographic work is now being produced not at the behest of local ‘institutions’ but in order to sell it into the Western metropolitan art markets. This phenomenon has resulted in many studies by anthropologists of these market forces, but in Gell’s view, although many of these are of great interest, for him they did not constitute an anthropology of art. He argued for an autonomous study of the anthropology of ethnographic art which looks at the works: “... as a by-product of the mediation of social life and the existence of institutions of a more general-purpose kind.” This will

⁵⁹ The following six paragraphs, with only minor amendments, were written by Dr Su Dalgleish. She found Gell’s work of great value in her doctoral analysis of Australian aboriginal art.

⁶⁰ Gell, *Agency*, p.7

⁶¹ Gell, *Agency*, p.8

lead to “ ... anthropology of art not circumscribed by the presence of institutions of any specific, art-related kind.”⁶²

Having argued that art which is produced for a very specific purpose is not art in the sense which is understood in the West, Gell then devoted much thought to what in fact it is. His aim was to move as far away as possible from the study of ethnographic art which uses the theories which are applied to the study of Western art. Rather he was searching for an acceptably ‘anthropological’ theory, which, in its key aspects, resembled other well-trying and widely accepted anthropological theories. He stated that it was his view that: “ ... the aim of anthropological theory is to make sense of behaviour in the context of social relations.” So “ ... the objective of the anthropological theory of art is to account for the production and circulation of art objects as a function of this relational context.”⁶³ In putting forward theories to account for the production in the non-Western world of what we would describe as art objects, he proposes that ‘persons or social agents’ are, in certain contexts, substituted for by *art objects*. He contended that in the study of non-Western creativity, nothing can be achieved by using Western ideas of aesthetics, semiotics, linguistic analogies, or apparent meanings. Indeed, he is not convinced that ‘art’, in fact, has anything to do with beauty. What it does have to do with, he believed, was *agency, intention, causation, result and transformation*.⁶⁴

Another brief synopsis of some of his central ideas is provided by Hirsch, Pinney and Kuchler. Gell, they write, ‘sought to explicate the insight that artworks – or what he later came to call indexes – embody intentional complexity which is capable of transcending cultural boundaries. The complexity lies in particular relations between agents, patients (recipients), indexes and the “prototype”: in formulating this nexus, he sought to remove the analysis of artworks from concerns with the “creativity” of the artist and aesthetic reception. Instead “artworks” are seen to emerge in the overlapping set of intentionalities which are orchestrated in particular cultural contexts. Any artefact from traps, to dolls, to priceless sculptures can become sources of agency and of “abductive capacity”: that is, to capture, hold and transform cognitive operations.’⁶⁵ Thus Gell ‘sought not simply to rescue art from the margins of anthropological concern and to rewrite its agenda, but to demonstrate how the ‘art nexus’ is of central concern to anthropological theory: the study of the relational basis of persons (Mauss), whereby artefacts are seen to embody the same intentional complexity as persons.’⁶⁶

Contradictions and creativity

Several things stand out from the accounts. Firstly, like all creative workers, he was clearly filled with diametrical and opposing characteristics. Some have been noted. As Chris Fuller noted in his obituary (*Independent*, 1 Feb. 1997, p.18) ‘[I]n many ways he was a romantic, but he was also adamantly rationalist’.⁶⁷ Hirsch writes that ‘I was always struck by his powerful intellectual capacities and insights and his

⁶² Gell, *Agency*, pp.8-9

⁶³ Gell, *Agency*, p.11

⁶⁴ Gell, *Agency*, p.5

⁶⁵ *A.T. Obituary*, p.23

⁶⁶ *A.T. Obituary*, p.23

⁶⁷ Quoted in Gell, *Art*, p.ix

equally powerful refusal to develop a “Gellian” school or system of thought to rival some of his other intellectually ambitious colleagues. The tendency is there in his book **The Anthropology of Time** and in **Art and Agency**, but once the exercise is complete, Alfred moves on to the next topic of interest, to the next intellectual performance.’ There was also a ‘tension between the very serious anthropological scholar and the man always intent on never taking himself or his work too seriously.’⁶⁸

Other contradictions could be noted. He was clearly rather shy and inward looking, but loved performing in public in front of an audience. He was an insider, who loved the collegial conviviality of being a member of a group, yet he remained an outsider in some ways. As one colleague put it, he was not a good team-player, at least in terms of routine teaching and administration. He was a self-confessed ‘bourgeois’, but was clearly extremely happy sitting in a dusty Indian market-place and living very simply.

He was a great lover of painting, music and literature, and yet his later work can almost be described as philistine in its dismissal of the content of art-works and concentration on their technical effects. This was something which Hirsch et al. comment on. ‘There was a central paradox at the core of Alfred’s interest in art and its anthropology. On the one hand, he argued that anthropologists must assume a detachment from the artwork – to get away from the religiosity of picture-looking – through a process of what he called “methodological philistinism”. On the other hand, he could still write about the intense pleasure he got from particular artworks, such as those by Titian and Duchamp.’⁶⁹ And it was something which he himself stressed. Writing of his essay on ‘The technology of enchantment’ he wrote, ‘I am not actually a Philistine, or a promoter of philistinism, as some have apparently supposed. I merely advocate “methodological philistinism” as an analytic device, so as to wrest the anthropological study of artworks away from the soggy embrace of philosophical aesthetics.’⁷⁰

Another paradox was that while he was very interested in technology in the abstract, and in visual representations both as subjects to study and as ways of conveying ideas, he showed only a limited interest, as far as I know, in the areas where they intersect concretely, that is photography, films, video, computers etc. We do not hear of his photographic collections, his use of slides or video and so on. He was, however, very interested in aircraft technology and visited airbases with his son Rohan.

He was someone who spent much time writing about the importance of clarity and simplicity of style. But much of his work, admittedly some of it only in first draft, is not easy to follow and approximates more to the style of his beloved Lévi-Strauss or Bourdieu, rather than Malinowski or Evans-Pritchard whom he equally admired.

He clearly admired the tough and aggressive and ‘punchy’ Edmund Leach, but his own very gentle character makes his writing far less rebarbative than he would perhaps have liked.

⁶⁸ Quoted by Hirsch in Gell, *Art*, pp.ix-x

⁶⁹ A.T. *Obituary*, p.23

⁷⁰ Gell, *Art*, pp.16-7

He was someone who addressed very large themes, but usually approached them from particular details, seeing in Blake's famous phrase 'a world in a grain of sand', the characteristic of intellectual (and actual) myopia.

He was centrally obsessed with 'thought' and 'artistic' traps and entanglements, and how one could escape them. Yet for much of the central part of his life, the 'wilderness' years between the mid 1970's and 1980's he gives the impression of himself being entangled and trapped in systems of ideas which he found very difficult to escape from.

Like all of us he longed simultaneously for the applause and instant gratification, the *frisson* of a direct reaction from an audience, yet he also hoped for some kind of long-term immortality. He wanted people to admire and emulate him, but did not want to found a school. He was, in the famous metaphor, a fox (who knows many small things) rather than a hedgehog (who knows one big thing). Yet there was also something longer term behind the constant scurrying and searching which might well have become more apparent if his life had not been terminated so early.

He wisely cast his reading well outside the central area of British social anthropology, but there is little sign that he had a serious knowledge of the early history of anthropology before Malinowski, of other currents and traditions outside Europe (e.g. America up to Margaret Mead), or of European philosophy and the great Enlightenment tradition apart from Kant and Hegel.

He was a delicate and subtle thinker, but often thought in binary categories of a startlingly over-simple kind, as in dismissing Marxism root and branch (until Bourdieu), development and anti-colonialism, semiotic approaches to art and so on. There was, as Alexander Pope had centuries before noticed in his essay on Criticism, a tendency to be too extreme just to shock and surprise. Some might say that he was at times keener on getting a laugh or a gasp than illuminating at a deeper level.

Clearly a strong key to his character was his sense of humour, and particularly a wry, detached, self-amusement and desire not only to prick other's people's bubbles but also his own. 'Always funny and full of wit, every conversation however casual or formal was to the point, and one came away knowing one had gained an insight or an idea one would not be likely to have developed in other ways.'⁷¹ As a teacher: 'Alfred's research continually flowed into his teaching which made him an excellent teacher who was not afraid to address inconsistencies in his own published work.... He did not encourage followers although many of his students were devoted to him.'⁷²

"What is clear is that those who knew him best were deeply fond of him. They understood that here was a rather shy, visually talented yet challenged boy, hiding inside an occasionally tough-sounding and enthusiastically performing intellectual. As one of them wrote, 'Alfred was a rounded person, a devoted husband and father to his son Rohan; their Cambridge home was always immensely welcoming to colleagues and students.'⁷³ At his death, Hirsch summarizes his bravery. 'Here was a man

⁷¹ A.T. *Obituary*, p.21

⁷² Hirsch, *Obituary*, p.154

⁷³ Hirsch, *Obituary*, p.154

without bitterness and self-pity who was at peace with himself and his work but also at the height of his intellectual powers.’⁷⁴

⁷⁴ Hirsch, *Obituary*, p.154