PART I

FASHIONING IDENTITIES
Moving across and between cultures is at the heart of anthropology. Ethnography is an inherently mobile enterprise, involving the ethnographer literally moving across space, over time, and between the relatively familiar and unfamiliar. Although the idea of ‘multi-sited fieldwork’ has become fashionable recently, good anthropology has always entailed a degree of multi-sitedness, even if some of those sites might be called ‘home’ and some might be encountered vicariously. Good anthropological training entails learning about many peoples and parts of the world and going to seminars beyond geographical specialisms. The themed seminar and the edited collection, in which scholars are brought together to comparatively discuss sites that they know in depth, are particularly important forums and formats in anthropology, allowing as they do for the possibility of sensitive appraisal of commonality and difference and the developing of the ‘meso-level’ theorising at which anthropology excels.

Shirley Ardener’s work has been exemplary in its recognition and realisation of the cross-cultural. Her own work has invariably contained sensitive and provocative comparative observations, as, for example, her superb research on sexual insult and female militancy, which considers not only a range of African examples but also cases from the Western women’s movement (Ardener 1975b). And her quite remarkable editorial corpus – in which most volumes are the outcome of a participative themed seminar, allowing the contributors to refine their work in relation to that of other presentations – is evidence of collaborative anthropological work at its best. These volumes are multi-sited in a way that no one ethnographer could hope to achieve; and they are ‘cross-cultural’ in that they move far beyond being a collection of diverse instances to exciting speculation on the nature and complexities of similarity and difference.

In many ways, these volumes effortlessly deal with a subject that is currently the source of much consternation and debate in some parts of anthropology: that
is, the question of how far it is possible or valid to talk in terms of ‘culture’ and to identify ‘difference’. In a world of increased travel, movement, and mixing, how is an anthropologist to go about her task? How can we try to understand variability and difference without reifying these into fixed, bounded, homogeneous ‘cultures’? And how can we be ‘cross-cultural’ without absolute cultural demarcations? All of this is also made still more challenging by our awareness of cultural change and its apparent rapidity. Where, and at what, is the anthropologist to look in the fast flow of fashion and innovation? Moreover, what are the implications for the notion of ‘ethnicity’? Can we use ‘ethnic’ labels any more, and what should we expect them to be indicative of?

These are questions that I have also struggled with (and sometimes decided to sweep to one side) in my own work. In my fieldwork in the Scottish Hebrides, it was often hard to know whether what I was describing should be accounted for as ‘Hebridean’, ‘local’, ‘Scottish’, or even, perhaps, ‘British’, ‘North European’, or (most non-emic) ‘Euro-American’; and, in my current work in Germany, I often struggle to decide whether to write, *inter alia*, ‘German’, ‘former West German’, ‘North Bavarian’, or ‘Franconian’. When the individuals with whom we are working in these places may themselves identify as being from numerous other places, the difficulty is compounded. It is worth pointing out at the start, however, that these difficulties are not all equal. Talking of ‘Germans’ tends to feel especially risky, partly, no doubt, because Germany was politically and culturally divided for a chunk of the twentieth century, though also, paradoxically, because it is simultaneously easy to talk of ‘Germans’, so recognisable are their stereotypes. With relatives and friends (German as well as English), we readily fall into observations of particularities of ‘the Germans’ but, perhaps perversely, this makes it feel more problematic to do so as an anthropologist. Moreover, in a political context in which Germany tends to welcome the idea of an integrated Europe, pointing out ‘Germanness’ can seem like an affront.

In contrast, ‘Scot’ is easier to use because, unlike ‘German’, those who self-identify with this nomination generally want it to be acknowledged and even celebrated. Yet, in other ways, it is equally tricky. My own life experience and my anthropological work have made me acutely aware of different kinds of ‘Scots’, of semi-, lapsed, resurrected, and reinvented Scottishness, and of those who in some ways are quintessentially ‘Scottish’ but nevertheless wary of referring to themselves as such. And, while ‘English’ and ‘British’ are acknowledged to be particularly elusive categories, fieldwork in an official British institution – the National Museum of Science and Industry (London’s Science Museum) – raised fewest difficulties for me in writing up, because the salience of the national label was taken as a given by those working there, even while it was consciously configured to include various ‘cultures’ with different histories.¹

In this chapter, my aim is to explore some of these questions and observations further in order to discuss the relationship between culture, difference, and ethnicity, and to think about the implications of this for our research and writing on these subjects today. One of the things that makes Shirley such good company, as well as an insightful anthropologist, is her observations of, and curiosity about,
everyday practices and popular culture. She has constantly embraced the serendipitous and followed leads thrown up by experience. Inspired by this, as well as by some of her particular writing (in this case, especially *Women and Space*), I have chosen to focus my discussion on an example encountered unexpectedly during my own recent fieldwork – beyond the ‘official’ boundaries of the topic that I was focusing upon. This was a television programme produced for Bavarian Television (Bayisches Fernsehen) called *Tapeten-Wechsel*, literally ‘Changing Wallpaper’ and figuratively ‘Changing Scenery’ or ‘Changing Surroundings’. Explicitly modelled on a BBC programme, *Changing Rooms*, the Bavarian version was at one level ‘the same programme’ and at another intriguingly different.

### Changing Rooms

The BBC’s *Changing Rooms* (produced by the independent company Bazal Productions) was launched in 1995 and rapidly became one of Britain’s most popular early evening shows, regularly attracting ten million viewers and moving in early 2004 from BBC2 to BBC1, a marker of having attained thoroughly mainstream status. Such is the possible rapidity of media cycles, however, that it was then axed later that same year (see the Postscript below). It is acknowledged to have been the ‘market leader’ in ‘lifestyle’ television programming and to have spawned a whole gamut of similar programmes in Britain (Spittle 2002) – house and garden makeover series (such as *Home Front* and *Home Front in the Garden*) and personal makeovers (e.g., *Looking Good*, in which couples effect a kind of sartorial change on their partners) – as well as adaptations and imitations abroad, the format being sold to twenty countries (http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/magazine/4034503.stm). In 1998, Bavarian Television (or, more specifically, Gruner + Jahr Funk- und Fernsehproduktion für den Bayerischen Rundfunk), with full acknowledgements to the BBC, launched its own version, *Tapeten-Wechsel*. Like its British forebear, the Bavarian *Changing Rooms* has become highly popular, reaching a record market share of almost 20 per cent in 2002 (http://www.medienkontor.de/2003/01/06/meldung01.html), though it does not seem to be part of such an extensive genre of similar programmes as in Britain and has not spun off the same paraphernalia of linked websites and books with DIY advice and titles such as *Jazz Up your Junk* (by Linda Barker, one of the designers on the British show). Nor have the interior designers who work on the show achieved the kind of cult status of many of their English counterparts, the latter appearing in numerous advertisements and magazine articles and having become sufficiently well known to be the subject of television impressionists. Interestingly, only the Bavarian ‘handyman’, Bastl Wastl (*basteln* meaning to make things, to handcraft), has come anywhere close to this generalised fame.

It is, of course, far from unusual for television programmes to travel across national or ethnic boundaries, and there is a growing body of studies of the ways
in which the same cultural product may be received in different places, one of the earliest examples of this being Laura Bohannon’s wonderful account of trying to explain *Hamlet* to the Tiv (Bowen 1966). The best works in this field, like Bohannon’s, have been those that go beyond the study of the direct moment of reception – the viewing – into a broader understanding of other facets of life. Not surprisingly, this is a field in which anthropologists are particularly well placed to offer illuminating accounts (see, for example, contributions to Askew and Wilk 2002). Neither is it unusual that a television programme format will be adapted for different viewing publics. Programmes such as *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* and *Big Brother* have also been widely transnationally transported, and have somewhat different rules in different places, as well as their own locally distinctive programmes on the same basic model. The Netherlands-born *Big Brother*, for example, has been the inspiration for a variation in France in which literary figures are imprisoned together in a chateau, one typewriter between them. So very French, you could not make it up – but somebody did, and successfully sold the rights. In this way, programmes are adapted or created by drawing on ideas about the cultural market and, in the process, relaying these back to viewers, concentrated and amplified.

It is through such processes that distinctive identities are, if not created, at least reinforced. Cultural products like these are stories being told about ourselves, much of the time without us really noticing the fact. Categories such as ‘German’ or ‘English’ are ever present, even if not explicitly spoken, and thus are available for filling with various content (McDonald 1993). The process is itself, as Lévi-Strauss’s concept of *bricolage* primes us to notice, rather like that employed by these home-improvement programmes. A basic structure, in this case the shell of a room and its contents, is altered, adapted and reordered in order to ‘update’ it and present it anew, while at the same time trying to capture and express the identity of its owners, making use of elements of the old, but perhaps ‘jazzed up’ and teasing at the limits of the acceptable. Yet, and here is where cultural difference comes in, the ways in which this is done may vary, if only subtly, as we can see in the case of the British and Bavarian versions of *Changing Rooms/Changing Wallpaper*.

**The Format**

The basic idea of the programme is that neighbours swap houses/flats and, with the help of a designer and the shared handyman (Bastl Wastl or the British ‘Handy Andy’), redecorate one of the rooms. This always involves two people, generally a mixed-gender couple (though sometimes other combinations, such as flatmates, a gay couple, or a mother and daughter), from each household making the swap. They are not allowed back to their own homes until two days later, by which time the work should be complete.

Part of the dramatic tension of the programme relies on labouring against the clock: will they complete in time? Typically, though more so in the British case,
things get increasingly frenzied as the deadline approaches. The other main
element of dramatic tension concerns whether the owners will like what has
happened to their home. Here, the neighbours are given a difficult task, that of
trying to safeguard the taste and identity of their friends, sometimes in the face of
what seems like (again, especially in the British case) rather irresponsible aesthetic
experimentalism on the part of the designers (who have never actually met the
people whose home they are redesigning). During the programme, cuts move
from one house to the other, and we see the transformation of the spaces, the
labour involved, the competition for Andy’s/Bastl’s time and talents, the worries
of the neighbours over whether they are doing the right thing and, occasionally,
their confrontation with the designer, the hassles, disasters, and triumphs. After
the deadline has arrived, designers are interviewed on how well they think things
have gone, on how much they have actually spent and whether this is within
budget, on their ‘best bargains’ and favourite items, and whether they think that
the owners will like it.

The denouement involves the programme presenter leading each couple
blindfolded back to their own room, where all at last is revealed. In both the
British and Bavarian versions, owners are typically nervous about seeing what has
become of their space and possessions, and they sometimes have to be encouraged
to remove their blindfolds. Watching the expression on their faces as they first see
the transformation is a televisual high point, the viewer struggling to decipher
what they really think as they almost invariably exclaim, ‘Oh my God!’ or, in
Germany, ‘Wahnsinn!’ (literally, madness). Sometimes tears and disappointment
follow, but most often pleasure is expressed, either enthusiastically or more
cautiously, coupled with comments about particular items. The programme ends,
in a ritual marking both spatial change (Ardener 1981: 21) and the resolution of
any conflict, with the pairs of neighbours reunited and sharing a glass of
champagne. (Though Bastl, true to his Bavarian stereotype, sticks to beer.)

Differences

In some respects, the mapping of Tapeten-Wechsel onto Changing Rooms is very
precise. Thus, not only do they share the basic formats, but there are other
similarities, such as in the rhyming names given to the handymen – Handy Andy
and Bastl Wastl – and the fact that both have marked regional accents (London,
Munich). The basic ‘social maps’, as Shirley calls them (Ardener 1981) – that is,
the structured hierarchies of relativities of dominance and muting that are played
out (ibid.: 13) – are the same in both programmes. Thus the couples are
equivalents, owning similar properties. During the makeover, the handyman and
the presenter are the only ones permitted to cross the boundary between the two
houses, moving through the temporarily redefined public and private and thus
acquiring knowledge that the other parties would dearly like to have. The
handyman acts as a kind of ritual clown or jester figure (made evident through the
rhyming name and strong accent), theoretically of lesser status than the designer but possessing crucial knowledge, capable of enabling or preventing the designer's vision and often speaking the blunt truths that others dare not.

There are also various, apparently fairly minor, differences, however. Perhaps the most immediately evident of these is the difference in budget. In Britain, each designer may spend up to £500; in Germany the budget is equivalent to twice this. In both cases, the designers sometimes exceed their budgets, the latter doing so equally and sometimes even more spectacularly than the former, despite having a larger amount to play with. The reason for the bigger budget in Bavaria is not a consequence of the price of building and decorating materials or furniture, which are often more reasonable than in Britain. It is, rather, a function of a greater reluctance to 'jazz up junk' and to engage in what might be called 'going for surface over substance'.

While some items of furniture are redeployed, perhaps re-covered, in the Bavarian programme, there is much less of this than in the British. Instead, what takes precedence in Tapeten-Wechsel is good-quality work and to this end a considerable amount of joinery is put together, involving saws, hammers, and nails. Nearly all of this involves 'real wood' rather than the MDF (medium-density fibreboard – a wood substitute) that the British programme has done so much to popularise. In particular, the Bavarian programme frequently involves laying hardwood floors, something that the British budget cannot stretch to, meaning that other 'solutions' (a keyword of Changing Rooms) have to be found.

Indeed, Tapeten-Wechsel typically contains so much basteln – making things from scratch – that the designers and neighbours themselves take on many tasks that would in Britain be left to Handy Andy. In this, it should be noted, they are generally fairly skilled, reflecting a greater emphasis in Germany on having high levels of skills in basteln. (This is something that children are encouraged to begin at a young age. On several occasions during my time in Germany I happened upon events, such as a children's activity day at the town hall, at which children as young as two were wielding full-sized hammers in order to bash nails into planks of wood. In my six-year-old daughter's school report, the one subject that was listed of particular concern was her relatively low level of attainment in basteln.)

Where the German programme is characterised by high levels of dovetailing joinery, then, the English is much more so by 'paint effects', which appear in numerous rather esoteric forms, such as stencilling, sponging, rag-rolling, and poly-bagging (in which paint is applied with a scrunched-up polythene bag). Creating a radically new appearance, often by redeploying existing items, is the leitmotiv of Changing Rooms. Where wood is the key substance in the German programme, paint – a material of surfaces – fulfils this role in the British.

The British programme is, in general, much more colourful than the Bavarian, literally and metaphorically. Rooms are often painted in loud colours – indeed, the gasp of shock when the neighbours see the colour chosen by the designer is another standard televiual moment – whereas in the Bavarian programme, white, typically dismissed as 'boring' by the Brits, is frequently used (wallpaper never
being employed, despite the literal meaning of the programme’s name) and colour schemes are rarely as bold or garish as in the British. In those few cases that I saw when bright colours were used in Bavaria, the owners were visibly upset, something that is perhaps related to Shirley Ardener’s note that spaces are sometimes conceptualised as having inherent colours (1981: 23). Certainly, in the German case, white seems to be equated with ‘light’, something highly prized in modern living spaces and contrasted with a ‘traditional’ aesthetic and ‘dark past’.

The designers themselves are also more visually and temperamentally sober in Tapeten-Wechsel, generally wearing casual jeans or stylish black (another cultural ‘colour inherence’?). None is as outlandish as Britain’s Lawrence Llewelyn-Bowen, now having graduated to be programme presenter, with his long curling hair and colourful rococo-inspired suits. In contrast to the calculatedly eccentric or even ‘wild and wacky’ British designers, the Germans are more thoughtful and measured, more concentrated on the task, and less busy playing to the cameras. It is hard to imagine them deciding to base a room design on a pair of frilly knickers, as was the case in one, not uncharacteristic design for Changing Rooms. They are also less likely to persuade the neighbours to accept ideas against their better judgement and more willing to see their task as working with them. And, while in both programmes there is plenty of joking and of worry about the fast-approaching deadline, in the British everything possible is done to actually meet it, work being shoddily performed if necessary just to give the appearance of completion. In the German, if all is not ready, extra time is allowed or the couples even return home knowing that there is more to be done. Quality, or substance, is not allowed to be compromised (or not to the same extent) for appearance.

Fashioning Identities

Shirley reminds us that ‘attention has … been drawn to the capacity of human beings to enrich life by placing great significance on seemingly trivial events…. The human spirit, it seems, creates its own visions of heaven and its triumphs as well as its own damnations and failures, even in apparently unpromising environments’ (Ardener 1981: 22). In some ways, the business of redecorating houses is an apparently fairly trivial matter – even an unpromising environment – and, likewise, some of the differences between the British and German programmes may seem rather minor. Yet it is to the awareness of the potential significance of such matters that both anthropology and feminism have contributed so much. As Shirley has written specifically on the subject of domestic space, ‘the home, far from being an arid arena deprived of rich significance compared with the world outside, may render up spiritual meanings lacking elsewhere’ (ibid.: 22–23).

One way of looking at home improvement programmes such as Changing Rooms and Tapeten-Wechsel is as lessons in the art of fashioning identities, a matter which could indeed be seen as to a degree ‘spiritual’, its reliance on hammers and glue notwithstanding. The great proliferation of such programmes, and their
gardening and personal appearance counterparts, might be seen as part of an
alleged change in ways in which self-identities are coming to be conceptualised
and realised in what is sometimes called ‘late modernity’ (or various near
synonyms). Drawn on here too is a more long-standing and widely resonant
cultural deployment of the home as a metaphor for the individual – and especially
for female subjectivity – and vice versa. The popularity of such programmes,
according to this perspective, lies at least partly in the fact that they are not ‘just’
about painting and decorating but about what is conceived as the more
fundamental but increasingly tricky matter of how to fashion the self, especially,
though not exclusively, the female self. If education, migration and social mobility
have meant that identities are no longer so ascribed by the circumstances of birth,
so embedded in relations of kinship or so tied to place, then individuals can be
increasingly free to ‘make themselves up’, to decide who they want to be (Giddens
1991). This has been called DIY culture – a culture of do-it-yourself identities
and making up your own rules and practices (e.g., Dürrschmidt et al. 1997;
MacKay 1998). In some forms, this can also be characterised by a greater reliance
on ‘reading signs’ and surfaces (a consequence of less actual direct knowledge
about people) and a proliferation of techniques for altering appearances.

Living spaces have, of course, long been one of the signs by which a person’s
identity could be read: that is, we could know something of who somebody is by
where they live and the type of property that they inhabit. This persists but it is
also accompanied by an increased (though not necessarily all-pervasive)
conceptualisation of the home as an arena for change and for expressing self-
wrought identities. Literal DIY, then, has added resonance as a technique for
helping not merely to manifest but to perform DIY identity. As Shirley observes
in Women and Space, ‘changes in belief [can be] deliberately paralleled by changes
in artefacts and in spatial arrangements’ (Ardener 1981: 23). Redesigning homes
can be seen as a deliberate parallel to changing understandings of, or beliefs in,
identity possibilities.

DIY Identities

DIY identities can be theorised as highly individualised and ‘disembedded’ from
‘traditional’ social relations and constraints, though they might also involve
constructing new forms of social ties (Giddens 1991; Dürrschmidt et al. 1997).
Anthropological studies of the home, including home decorating in the late
twentieth century, cast doubt on the extent to which these processes are, in fact,
disembedded and radically novel. As is clear from the studies in Women and
Space, as well as in more recent collections (e.g., Birdwell-Pheasant and Zúñiga
1999, Chapman and Hockey 1999, Cieraad 1999; and especially Miller 2001a),
the home is also a space in which perhaps conventional social relations are played
out and in which culturally understood functionality has to be allowed, and this
strains against pure ‘expressivity’. Home design needs to incorporate accepted
ideas about the organisation of social activities (ideas that, as *Women and Space* showed, may vary cross-culturally), living with heirlooms and even unwanted gifts, and making space for collections of, say, cuddly toys or allowing for serious home-brewing. Moreover, what Miller (2001b and especially 2001c) calls the ‘agency’ of the home is also implicated here, compromising the agency of the home decorators, who may feel themselves constrained by the existing state of their homes and, variously, lack of sufficient money, time, and skills. The message of a programme such as *Changing Rooms*, however, is that rather little of these are needed – only vision and will.

None of this is to say that viewers of *Changing Rooms* necessarily fully accept this idea or its metaphorical implication that identities may be radically reflexively self-redesigned, even with relatively few means. Moreover, both the British and Bavarian programmes temper the idea of total redesign, though they do so in interestingly different ways. Relatedly, they also have somewhat different ‘takes’ on the individuality that is generally seen as the goal of expressive DIY. *Changing Rooms* does celebrate the individually different. Designers strive to create something that will not look like anything that has existed before, even while they enjoy the idea of ‘the theme’, deriving inspiration from, say, the medieval castle or South Sea island. ‘Customising’ the mass-produced is a key technique here, items being ‘rescued’ from the world of sameness and turned into individual pieces (Miller 1988). At the same time, existing items of furniture are also used but refashioned to look different. In *Tapeten-Wechsel* there is also a degree of such rescuing and refashioning but, in contrast to the British programme, there is less of this. Moreover, finished rooms look a good deal more similar to one another (at least, to my British eye). Where *Changing Rooms* plays up and even exaggerates an ‘expressive individuation’ (as Charles Taylor (1989) more specifically characterised what is sometimes called ‘individualisation’), the *Individualisierung* (‘individualisation’ – a keyword in some German social science theorising (e.g., Beck 1998) that has also been influential in Britain) of *Tapeten-Wechsel* does not seem to need to be proclaimed at surface level in quite the same way. Rather, the individualisation in the Bavarian case seems to be rooted more in the individualised nature of the process, the serious handcrafting, than in a highly individually differentiated ‘look’.

**Gender Identities**

The central area of exploration of *Women and Space* is the gendering of space, especially of the home. While certain parts of the house may have particular gender associations or be deemed the space of one gender more than another (see also, for example, Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995), in Western Europe in particular, the home tends to be seen as women’s space to a greater extent than it is men’s (Steedman 1982, Brydon and Floyd 1999). Here, women are not only prone to spend more time than men, but are also more likely to be responsible for
the home as an expression and, consequently, to see the home as an aspect of their own self-fashioning – or, at least, to be more conscious of the fact that their home will be regarded as a reflection of their own tastes and personalities (Clarke 2001). If *Changing Rooms* and *Tapeten-Wechsel* can be seen to some extent at least as scripts for fashioning identities, then how is gender played out? And is this different in the two countries?

As described above, the programme generally entails mixed-sex couples decorating each other's homes, the participation of both male and female partners being presented as a kind of ideal type. The script here is one of the home as a collective project for couples to fashion their joint identities, men being drawn into the shaping of this 'private' space along with women, in what might be regarded as a statement of gender equality and a denial of the idea of the home as especially the preserve of women. In the detail of more specific cases, however, more 'traditional' gendered differences emerge, in particular, in the tendency for the men to defer to the women's opinions on decoration, so affirming the idea of women as especially responsible for matters of taste and the home. In many ways, what is also on screen in *Changing Rooms/Tapeten-Wechsel* is the drama of 'coupledom', as couples negotiate both the designers and their own tastes and habits in a space that traditionally has been especially women's sphere of creativity and is now, alongside the DIY boom, increasingly witness to the male homeowner's tastes and skills too.6

While the performance of coupledom seems to be equally the case in the British and the Bavarian programmes, creativity itself seems to be more feminised in *Changing Rooms*. This is connected to the differing aesthetics described above. The German emphasis on handcrafting solid materials relies on skills that are more often seen as masculine in Germany as well as in Britain, and the greater weight accorded to form and function has also been regarded in design circles as relatively masculine. In contrast to *Tapeten-Wechsel*, *Changing Rooms* involves designs that are more likely to be associated with feminine styles, such as the use of more decoration, colour, and soft furnishings. The *Changing Rooms* designers themselves are also more likely to self-present as feminine or to a degree effeminate, interior decoration being an occupation more likely to be regarded as women's work in Britain.

Gender is also played out in the work conducted. In both programmes, there are often attempts made to flout the usual gendered associations of work tasks by setting men at the sewing machine or handing women the drill. These, however, act paradoxically, for they serve to remind at the same time of the more usual gendered associations and skills (especially where those charged with the tasks are clearly not competent).7 Moreover, although there are higher levels of skills in general in *Tapeten-Wechsel*, both Bastl Wastl and Handy Andy clearly possess superior knowledge and as such they act as icons of traditional masculine skill. (Neither is ever seen at the sewing machine.) Through their quips and joking, as well as their greater capabilities, they often highlight the inadequacies of the other participants when it comes to the work that in German is described as *das Grobe*
– the rough stuff. When the going gets tough, the message seems to be, we need a real man after all. However much we might like the idea of playing with identities and refashioning them, we cannot do without the capabilities represented by the working-class, local, and traditionally masculine character of Andy/Bastl. If the home and men are being feminised by interior decoration, and if identities are increasingly being presented as up for refashioning, Andy and Bastl serve as playful reminders of some of what might be lost along the way.

Conclusion

Both Changing Rooms and Tapeten-Wechsel produce a kind of commentary upon matters that are about far more than the painting of walls and stuffing of cushions. Both produced to the same template, at virtually the same time in history, within the same broad geographical area (Europe), it is not surprising that they possess many similarities. Matters such as identity fashioning, the role of the home, and gender relations are broadly the same in the two countries.

The programmes, however, also reveal subtle differences, as we have seen. To some extent these differences seem to fit relatively familiar stereotypes that each country holds of the other. The depiction of Germans as creating products that are good-quality and reliable, but perhaps a bit boring, is well known. (Think Volkswagen.) Germans, according to this stereotype, are very, and perhaps obsessively, sensible and rational, though sometimes also highly stylish in a cool, hard-edged kind of way. (Think Pögenpohl kitchens.) The stereotypical German aesthetic is relatively masculine, privileging line, form, function, and quality. (Think Vorsprung durch Technik.) Germans watching Changing Rooms would also be likely to have some of their existing stereotypes about Brits confirmed: shoddy quality and often poor taste, with a puzzling predilection for garish colours and unsuitable materials, though perhaps also a strangely admirable eccentricity and lack of concern about what others might think of them. German friends would express (feigned?) surprise after visits to Britain over the cramped room sizes, hideously unmatching decor, lack of double glazing, small and lumpy beds, and the peculiarly unhygienic practice of having carpeted bathrooms. These impressions were generally based on bed-and-breakfast establishments, the domestic interiors most often encountered by visitors from other countries.

What is partly going on here is that, as both Malcolm Chapman (1982) and Maryon McDonald (1993) have elegantly argued (drawing on Edwin Ardener’s ideas about language and reality (1989: chap. 11)), labels are being populated with that which fits pre-existing ideas. We easily seek confirmation of the views we already hold. This is one reason why anthropologists have cause to feel suspicious of such a process, and why we might want to point out instances that do not confirm such preconceptions. Much important anthropological work has indeed challenged stereotypes on the basis of a first-hand knowledge of the people.
involved (as many contributions to volumes edited by Shirley show; see, for example, Okely 1975).

At the same time, however, the same basic reinforcing process is carried out by self-identifying groups in relation to themselves. Changing Rooms has been produced for a British audience by the British Broadcasting Company and Tapeten-Wechsel adapted for a Bavarian audience by a Bavarian company. Such a process contributes to the production of cultural differences between groups of various sorts, especially those separated by language and/or national boundaries and possessing shared institutions capable of producing representations. The representations and cultural forms created may or may not include features that also support stereotypes held by outsiders. Thus, for example, a visitor to Bavaria may note some cultural differences that conform to prior expectations (e.g., the rows of sauerkraut in the supermarket) and others that do not (e.g., the popularity of doner kebab). The good cultural critic will explain the latter as well as the former (Çaglar 1995; Richter 2002). Certainly, within either Britain or Bavaria there will be a good deal of variety, resulting not least from ethnic and cultural mix.

Yet, as both Shirley and Edwin Ardener have pointed out, what we are dealing with here are not exclusive categories with clear-cut boundaries but the ways in which these work in use (e.g., S. Ardener 1975a; E. Ardener 1989: 168). There will be variety but this can coexist with what Edwin called 'semantic density' (1989: chap. 11) – relatively 'core' meanings, those most often employed and perhaps most likely to be recognised as familiar by those who use them, even if that familiarity means that they are rendered unremarkable or invisible. Trying to grasp the 'semantically dense' is a key aspect of the anthropological attempt to grasp 'cultural difference'. Social psychologist Michael Billig has devised the term 'banal nationalism' to describe the ways in which nationality may be 'flagged' simply by being mentioned in numerous contexts in daily life (1995). What the Ardeners alert us to goes beyond this: it is not just about employing certain terms (and certainly not just self- or other-labelling) but concerns all kinds of practices and what Edwin called 'materiality'. That is, it is about such matters as uses of space, bodily movements, dress, drinking, home decorating, and other topics of the kind covered in series edited by Shirley and colleagues, and their differential patternings. Indeed, the material and practical expression of cultural difference is what accounts for the apparently incontrovertible and sometimes 'obvious' nature of such difference even if we cannot at first quite put our finger on what is involved.

In Women and Space, Shirley draws attention to the 'correspondence between the so-called "real" physical world and its "social reality"' (Ardener 1981: 11). As she argues, this should not be understood as 'simple one-way "cause and effect"' (ibid.: 12) but as the outcome of cumulative 'both-way' interaction that has resulted in 'synchronicities' (ibid.; see also E. Ardener 1989: 168). Putting it a bit crudely, social uses and practices shape uses of physical spaces and, simultaneously, the latter shape the social uses and practices, and so on. The cumulative nature of this is important and can involve processes such as those identified by Lévi-Strauss in his discussion of bricolage (1963). The emphasis on
wood in *Tapeten-Wechsel* is an example. This is not simply a novelty produced in this programme but draws on long-standing ideas in Germany about the importance of forests as sites of the German spirit (*Geist*) (see, for example, Schama 1995: chap. 2) and on wood as a material that in some sense indicates ‘home’, there being a preference, as Drazin argues for Romania, for leaving wood grain on show (Drazin 2001). What is involved here might even be thought of as a ‘cumulativity’. It is also evident in such matters as children being encouraged to handle and work with wood at early ages: they are given wooden toys, and these are perceived as more wholesome than playthings made from other substances. Indeed, wood can, I suggest, stand for substance over surface, as emblematic of a relationship that is authentic, natural, and solid.

I have suggested above that in the two programmes there seems to be a tendency in the Bavarian to emphasise substance and in the British to emphasise surface. In part, this is a function of cumulativities of the sort discussed in relation to wood as a substance. But it may also show simultaneities with other kinds of ongoing identity processes. On the one hand such programmes can be seen as linked to the spread of ideas of DIY identities but, as I have suggested, not perhaps in quite the same ways in the two countries. This prompts the question of whether, in addition to different inflections rendered by cumulativities, the differences might also be related to simultaneities with wider identity processes.

*Changing Rooms* was launched at the peak of the DIY boom, a phenomenon that, as various commentators have noted, flourished under Thatcherism (e.g., Tomlinson 1990; Clarke 2001: 23). Ideas of individual entrepreneurship, of making something of oneself, of origins being unimportant, and of practical activity were all characteristic of the neoliberal conservatism and general DIY ethos espoused by Thatcher. Her selling off of council housing for private ownership epitomised her view that private ownership would produce better results than would state ownership, as well as manifesting the Conservative celebration of the home and individual property. The Labour government that came to office in 1997 largely adopted the same philosophy. Moreover, its attempts to give the nation a new face and, in particular, to present it as ‘young and dynamic’ (two concepts cast as linked) chimed well with the idea of *Changing Rooms*. ‘Cool Britannia’ was the term created by the PR firms employed, and it was manifest in such things as Britart and Prime Minister Tony Blair posing with hip new pop bands and meeting ministers from other countries in rooms with funky designer furniture. Brits were to be presented as lively and different, even while at the same time there was a rhetoric of this always having been part of being British even if it had not previously been given official imprimatur and proper space to flourish.

While Germany in the 1990s also saw first a conservative government and then a nominally socialist one, and while it broadly shared a neoliberal climate, its principal concerns were to some extent different. In particular, the major national post-unification task was to dovetail the former East and West. Those from the former Democratic and Federal Republics generally continued to see
themselves as culturally distinct, there being talk of a cultural wall remaining even though the physical Mauer had gone. One difference, from the perspective of Wessies (those from the former West), was that Easterners (Ossies), having only been able to purchase poor-quality goods in the socialist period, would accept and maybe even cause a spread of the shoddy.\(^8\)

In Bavaria, as a wealthy former Western state bordering on the former East and recipient of significant migration from it, such fears were particularly marked; and this may also have contributed to Tapeten-Wechsel’s emphasis on high quality and high cost and eschewing of the ‘something-for-nothing’ motif of Changing Rooms. Moreover, in the decade after unification it became increasingly recognised that what was needed was to put something in place that would be a good foundation for the future and that would last. Quick fixes would not do. In this post-euphoria period it was also increasingly clear that the real work of unification would take much longer than had originally been envisaged. So, in contrast to the usual images of German efficiency and punctuality, a new tendency to overrun deadlines, often remarked upon by Germans themselves, became widespread in the public sphere. As in Tapeten-Wechsel, finishing late became regarded as a lesser evil than doing a poor job.

In some areas of theorising (albeit not generally anthropological) ‘culture’ is thought of as a kind of ‘surface’ – an epiphenomenon of more substantial matters (especially economic). There is also a tendency, perhaps especially in popular thought, to regard culture and difference as ‘in themselves’, disconnected from all else, as confirmation simply of difference per se. In this essay, I have tried to argue for the validity of a focus on cultural difference even in the face of variability and change, and have attempted to point out why we should not be surprised to find differences consolidating around national or ethnic identities. In doing so, I have drawn on the theorising of Shirley and Edwin Ardener in order to present an alternative to the perspectives of culture as surface effect or as hovering autonomously. To be sure, their own works make these points more fully and elegantly. Nevertheless, through a brief account of two versions of the ‘same’ television programme, I hope to have been able to show some of the purchase of the cross-cultural and some of the work of identity fashioning in a world of changing cultures, rooms, and wallpaper.

Postscript

In September 2004 the BBC announced that no new series of Changing Rooms would be made. According to the BBC, this was just the inevitable end of shelf life and the decision to bow out at a high point. In the words of presenter Laurence Llewelyn-Bowen, the programme had ‘done everything there is to do’ and was ending ‘on a high note’ (http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/magazine/4034503.stm). Others, however, suspected that mounting criticisms of
the programme, in particular of the botched work that it often entailed and that was increasingly being ‘outed’ in the media, were largely to blame (e.g., “The curtains were nailed on, it was all resoundingly naff” (Daily Mail, 29 Sept. 2004)). Some newspaper reports suggested that there were more fundamental and gendered shifts at work by bringing the news of the demise of the programme together with results from a study commissioned by Standard Life that showed that British men seemed to be becoming increasingly less likely to be willing to undertake DIY (e.g., Daily Telegraph, 24 Nov. 2004). Working longer hours than anywhere else in Europe, nine out of ten of the five hundred men questioned said that they would not attempt any DIY at all, 67 per cent of them agreeing that they were ‘not up to the job’ and 27 per cent that they were not interested (ibid.). Moreover, the reports implied, the experience of the DIY boom and Changing Rooms itself had revealed that DIY often led to shoddy work and personal injuries, 100,000 people a year requiring hospital treatment for DIY injuries (Department of Trade and Industry figures, ibid.). Spurred on by seeing the havoc that Changing Rooms could produce, British men preferred to leave the job to a professional – like Handy Andy. Time will tell whether this heralds shifting ‘simultaneity’ and a deeper rejection of the quick fix.

Acknowledgements

Mike Beaney was responsible for making me watch Tapeten-Wechsel. For this, and for discussions of it, I thank him, as well as Tara, Thomas, and Harriet, who also offered insightful observations. Thanks too to Judith Okely, Ronnie Frankenberg, Jeanette Edwards, and Simone Abram for encouraging comments and helpful suggestions.

Notes

2. For further discussion of the content of the programme see Spittle 2002.
3. ‘Owners’ as used here may include those renting or otherwise inhabiting, though in Britain it is almost invariably the case that those on the programme are homeowners. In the German case, those involved are less likely to actually own the properties that are being renovated, long-term renting being much more common in Germany than in Britain. In some ways this serves to highlight even more the differences between the two countries, in that doing a high-quality job – which as I argue below is a significant difference between the programmes in the two countries – would be less likely in a rented than in an owned property in Britain.
4. The fact that getting things completed may also involve other members of the production crew than those actually shown on camera and that work may be even more poorly completed than it appears on camera has been a mainstay of a set of accusatory ‘revelations’ about the programme that have gathered over the years.
5. The idea of the home as expressive of identities and of the bourgeois home as a materialisation of a new conception of individuality rooted in notions of interiority and privacy is generally said to have emerged in Western Europe in the eighteenth century. See, for example, Steedman 1982; Brydon and Floyd 1999; Maleuvre 1999.

6. Another ‘home’ programme that began on British television, called DIY SOS, is dedicated to trying to help households in which repairs are urgently needed. The need for repair is almost always due to men’s hopeless botch jobs, taking on tasks for which they were insufficiently skilled, or which they never managed to complete or simply got utterly wrong. Women on this programme are typically presented as modern-day damsels in distress, possessing the vision but lacking the necessary accompanying male skill to put things right – until the DIY SOS team arrives, knight-like, to the rescue.

7. A survey in 2001 reported that in Britain gender differences remained in the domain of DIY: ‘It’s amazing to note that sexism about DIY in the U.K. is alive and well! If it comes to the crunch, it’s still the men who have to get the job done. Of the sexes, 65 per cent think men are better at DIY. And in these times of supposed sexual equality, 60 per cent of women still think that men are better at DIY than them. (Well, that’s the excuse anyway!’ (http://www.prnewswire.co.uk/cgi/news/release?id=65587).

8. By the end of the 1990s, however, Ossies had become increasingly unwilling to accept the idea that all of their goods had been of lesser quality than those produced in the West. Consequently, a market for former Eastern goods, and the resumption of manufacture of some of them, has grown up. For a discussion of some of the changes in housing, especially in East Germany, since unification, see Weinthal 2002.

References


