CHAPTER ONE

THE HUMAN FLESH

The good historian resembles the ogre of the fable. Where he scents the human flesh, he knows that there lies his game.

Marc Bloch
An apology for history

'Tis a little wonderful, and what I believe few people have thought much upon, viz. the strange multitude of little things necessary in the providing, producing, curing, dressing, making and finishing this one article of bread.

Daniel Defoe
Robinson Crusoe

I have often been at pains to explain to different audiences what I mean exactly by a ‘sensori-motor culture propped against material culture’—an admittedly obscure expression, yet central to my endeavours.¹ I came to elaborate on an example which speaks to most people. It concerns the incompatibility of temper between hunters and conservationists.

I will not concern myself with the most violent and spectacular manifestations of their arguments in France: the slaughter of protected wildlife in the swamps of the Grande Brière, or the destruction of miradors used in pigeon shooting. There are similar cases in Great Britain, especially related to the ban on fox hunting. Like all such radical actions, they are performed by small if vocal minorities, and they are less significant than the dissatisfaction of reasonable people. There are indeed reasonable hunters, just as there are reasonable conservationists.

¹ The expression ‘culture of motricity’ (culture motrice) is borrowed from neuroscientist Alain Berthoz (1997: 9) who wrote: ‘In anthropology, the object of study have often been the representations, beliefs, patterns of political, kinship, economic organisation… There is an obvious lack of concern for the “culture of motricity”’. For the sake of clarity, we will use ‘sensori-motor culture’—an expression Berthoz would be unlikely to condemn.
Sometimes, although rarely, some people combine both inclinations. By and large, however, they do not coexist easily.

In the autumn, around the forest paths, hikers, mountain bikers and hunters come across each other and irritate one another. These provocations bring to the fore the view developed in the present study, namely that they do not proceed from diverse ‘opinions’ regarding moral ‘values’ or political ‘philosophies’. They do not result from diverging ideas or beliefs. They get under the skin and reach deeply into the psyche. To put it bluntly: primarily, they do not address the mind, but the body. It does not mean that people do not think about it. It means that first and foremost, the confrontation occurs between two subjective regimes. They depend on practices based on somewhat different and incompatible material worlds, together with the sensori-motor conducts related to them.

The mountain biker mobilises his motor conducts, his body techniques and a sensori-motor culture as he rides his bike; the suspension and its ‘attenuated pumping effects’, the helmet, the flashy outfits. He stays on track, the muddy, sandy or stony surface. He breathes the fresh air of the mountain or the forest. His machine utilises aircraft technology rather than that of heavier land vehicles. It bounces over the steps and stones, flies over the tracks. It blends together the roughness of the land and the lightness of the ether. The mountain bike promises a dreamland to a restrained humanity.

The hunter, by contrast, identifies with quite a different material object. His hunting gun of which there is a vast variety of models depending on the bore, the position of the barrels, the shape of the butt and its dimensions. Each hunter will choose the one better adjusted to his morphology, his experience, his taste and the type of hunting he practices. He will learn how to handle it, open it, load it. He will embrace the art and the emotion of gun shooting. In addition, he will be equipped with cartridges, clothes, boots, a horn and a dagger when hunting large game. He may have a hunting dog, and adjust his hunting habits to the idiosyncrasies of his companion.

Without any doubt, these objects represent signs in a system of communication or connotation. This is a well established point since the publication of Roland Barthes’s *Mythologies* in 1957. But, above all—and this is what I underscore in this book—they all possess a ‘praxic’ value that cannot be reduced to the ‘use value’ of the economist or the utilitarian philosopher, despite the fact that all these dimensions of the object (sign value, praxic value, use value) to a certain extent overlap. By ‘praxic’