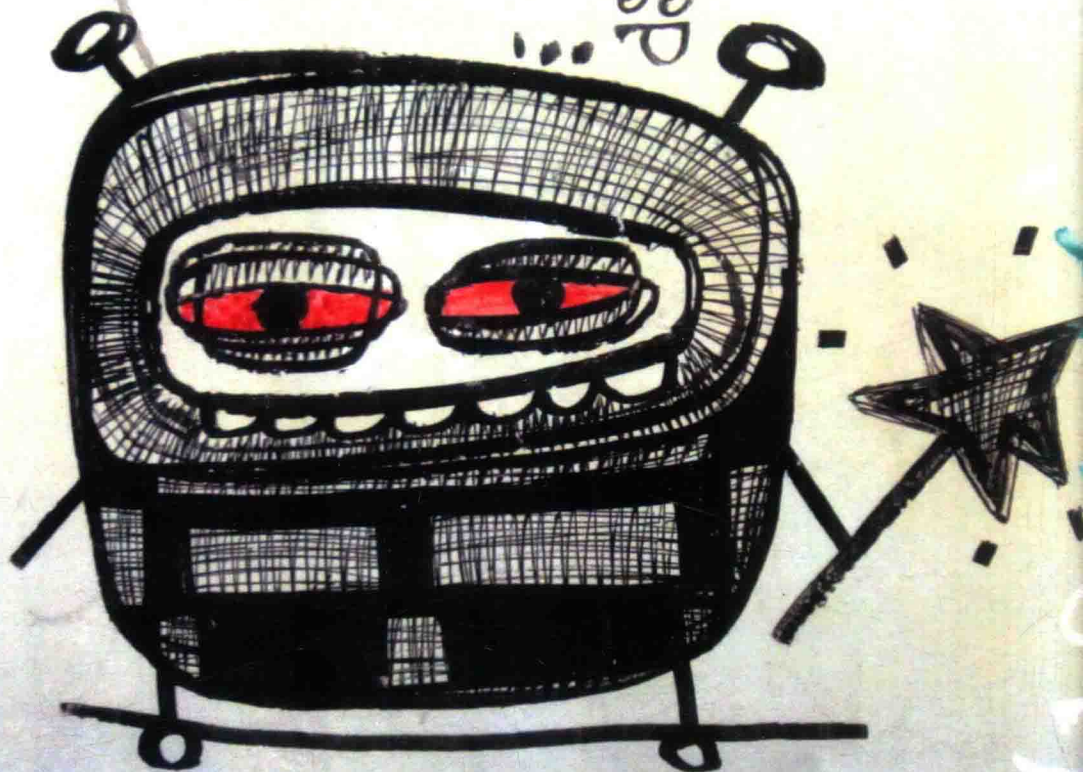


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De-Centring Cultural Studies

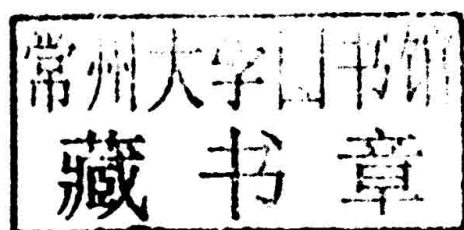
Past, Present and Future
of Popular Culture

Edited by José Igor Prieto-Arranz, Patricia Bastida-Rodríguez,
Caterina Calafat-Ripoll, Marta Fernández-Morales
and Cristina Suárez-Gómez

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De-Centring Cultural Studies

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This volume would not exist without its contributors. Thanks are therefore due to the authors of the different chapters, who have been patient enough to accept our feedback and follow our guidelines. We truly hope they will find this experience as rewarding as it has been for us. Our especial thanks go to Dr Josephine Dolan, Dr Margalida Pons, Prof Paul Julian Smith, and Dr Slávka Tomaščíková, for the trust they have placed in us and for being generous enough to share their research with all of us.

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THE EDITORS

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INTRODUCTION

DE-CENTRING CULTURAL STUDIES: PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE OF POPULAR CULTURE

JOSÉ-IGOR PRIETO-ARRANZ,
PATRICIA BASTIDA-RODRÍGUEZ,
CATERINA CALAFAT-RIPOLL,
MARTA FERNÁNDEZ-MORALES
AND CRISTINA SUÁREZ-GÓMEZ

1. Why *De-Centring Cultural Studies*?

There is widespread agreement that the origin of cultural studies as we know it today can be found in post-World War II Britain, although the legacy of other figures from both within and outside the UK (such as Matthew Arnold, the Leavises or several members of the so-called Frankfurt School) has not always been given its due. Historical issues aside, cultural studies gradually came into shape in an attempt to find a way to overcome the limitations of traditional academic disciplines (Wallace 1995, 508; Surber 1998, 129-134) and to highlight the relevance of cultural manifestations hitherto ignored by academia. This twofold aim already points towards the two main clashes that cultural studies has had with the university establishment, namely the departmentalisation of knowledge (resulting from the arbitrary boundaries set up between fully-established disciplines) and the canonisation of the objects of study of such disciplines (which in turn results in whatever lies beyond such boundaries being considered unfit for "serious" academic study).

The first sign of academic recognition was the creation of the University of Birmingham's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies

(CCCS) in 1964, which for years led the way in the field although never quite imposing a single or coherent theoretical model (Bathwick 1992, 330-331). In fact, cultural studies may be said to remain to this day a deliberately diffuse area of academic research which (1) has quite successfully resisted departmentalisation; and (2) draws on a variety of theoretical approaches with a single aim: the interpretation of *all kinds* of cultural phenomena. As Walton puts it, cultural studies, rather than a discipline understood in the traditional way, “is a knowledge-producing set of practices or strategies which, rather than search for certainties, produces knowledge and diverse forms of understanding which are constantly open to further questioning” (2008, 295).

This flexibility and systematic resistance of the strait-jacket of academic departmentalisation—which in many ways mirrors the complexity of its object of study—are probably two of the key ingredients of its success and expansion beyond the UK. This expansion is worth commenting on, as it spans a good many different (although especially English-speaking) countries including the United States (albeit the *cultural studies* label is not always used there) and Australia, and has been evidenced by the countless journal articles, books and conferences that have appeared or taken place over the last two decades.

However, this has been no easy ride for cultural studies. To mention but a relevant example, the University of Birmingham’s Department of Cultural Studies and Sociology, heir to the original CCCS, was closed down in 2002 amidst great controversy. This closure can be easily read in terms of the aforementioned departmentalisation of knowledge—which cultural studies has always been a threat to—not having been completely overcome in the very country it expanded from. More specifically, this notorious incident has been interpreted as an attempt to curtail what some sociologists viewed as an intrusion on the part of cultural studies.¹

If, as the example above suggests, cultural studies still faces resistance in the centre, i.e. in those very countries in which it rose to academic prominence, it is easy to imagine how much more difficult the situation must be in those other *peripheral* countries like Spain in which cultural studies is to be seen at best as an emergent research field. Cultural studies was still barely visible throughout the Spanish-speaking world in the early 2000s (García Canclini 1994; Gies 2000; Jordan and Morgan-Tamosunas 2000). And even if the situation is slowly changing at least in Spain—largely through the contribution of many scholars with an English philology background (Carrera-Suárez 2005; Walton 2012), there is still a long way to go before cultural studies becomes fully established in Spanish academia.

Some of the difficulties it still faces may be seen to derive once again from the challenge that cultural studies poses to traditional disciplinary approaches to knowledge. Indeed, its holistic concept of culture (more on this below) is diametrically opposed to traditional disciplinarity. This has already kicked off interdisciplinary forces within well-established academic fields.² Consequently, cultural studies, together with other closely-related approaches to cultural phenomena such as the “ethnoliterature” discussed by Picornell-Belenguer (this volume), has grown to be regarded not only as an *interdiscipline* but also as an *antidiscipline*. By way of example, many years had to pass before the University of Birmingham first offered a university degree in cultural studies. As a result and for a long time, those interested in doing cultural studies could only do so at PhD level. This was a clear attempt to avoid turning cultural studies into yet one more “orthodox” discipline.

The situation could not be more different today since, at least in Britain, a great many universities offer BAs in cultural studies, but reception to this change has been mixed. On the one hand, Stuart Hall, one of the so-called “fathers” of cultural studies, and still one of its most influential theorists, has made public his mixed feelings about the success, institutionalisation and, ultimately, worldwide expansion of the field (Hall 1999). On the other, there is increasing pressure (coming from outside the UK and perhaps especially from the USA) on cultural studies to become an academic discipline if only because this will help it gain valuable visibility both within and outside academia (McEwan 2002).

Whilst not completely exempt from controversy in the English-speaking world, the expansion of cultural studies has been harshly criticised in other territories. Such criticism has largely centred on both its alleged lack of rigour and object of study, although it could also be claimed that at the base of such accusations lies a notorious attempt to protect comfortably departmentalised knowledge. And to this day Spain remains one of those countries which, to say the least, have not particularly favoured the introduction and ulterior expansion of cultural studies. Thus, it has not been yet officially recognised by the Spanish university, with no degrees or departments to its name. Spain’s still recent immersion in the European Higher Education Area may still prove a positive influence in this regard, although the way reforms have so far been implemented, not particularly aided by the current economic recession, raises many doubts.

Doubts also result from the rather pessimistic description that both Carrera-Suárez (2005) and Cornut-Gentile D’Arcy (2005) provide of Spanish academia. In an account that leaves no stone unturned, both

authors discuss the highly hierarchical, conservative and compartmentalised Spanish university, convincingly describing how this overall situation becomes a stumbling block to promotion for those perceived not to have complied with the established conventions of disciplinary knowledge.

This does not mean, however, that cultural studies does not exist in Spain. As Carrera-Suárez points out, the *Asociación Española de Estudios Anglo-Norteamericanos* (AEDEAN) holds annual conferences and both its conferences and its journal, *Atlantis*, are open to cultural studies. It is equally worth mentioning that the cultural studies panel is also one of the most popular at the AEDEAN conferences, as judged by the number of papers presented in it. Moreover, there is the still small but active *Iberian Association for Cultural Studies* (IBACS), responsible for the organisation of the successful Culture and Power conferences, and SELICUP (*Sociedad Española de Estudios Literarios de Cultura Popular*), which has also made a valuable contribution to the visibility of Spanish cultural studies and popular culture.

It follows that cultural studies has somehow infiltrated the Spanish university establishment, mostly through its English departments (Walton 2012). This is hardly surprising since the same departments have also served to disseminate closely related interdisciplinary areas of research such as gender and women's studies. What is slightly more surprising is that it is precisely English studies (which only became established in Spanish universities as recently as the 1970s, most possibly with some resentment and scepticism from the more traditional areas of classical, romance or even Spanish philology) that has produced some of the most critical attitudes to cultural studies.

On the other hand, the debt that cultural studies owes to English studies in Spain has also had another negative consequence. Ironically, most of the cultural studies-related research produced in Spain does not tackle Spanish or Hispanic issues but focuses on cultural phenomena from the English-speaking world. This is due not so much to lack of interest on the part of Spanish scholars but to the rules of academic promotion as applicable in Spain, since the fear exists that non-pertinent research might not be fairly taken into account in the context of e.g. research assessment exercises or job applications. This in turn goes a long way towards explaining why the best-known pieces of work in Spanish cultural studies have been published in English abroad and, needless to say, authored by non-Spanish scholars. Among these, Gies (2000) and Jordan and Morgan-Tamosunas (2000) stand out, and mention must also be made of the pioneering work carried out by the likes of Jo Labanyi (Graham and

Labanyi 1995) and Paul Julian Smith (2003, 2007), both founding editors of the *Journal of Spanish Cultural Studies*.

This cannot but stress the value of the present volume which, although clearly aiming at an international readership, has been conceived in Spain by an all-Spanish editorial team, and includes analyses of a wide range of cultural phenomena and materials—many of which are Spanish. Hence the suggestive title, *De-Centring Cultural Studies*, chosen for this volume, as it makes reference to both our own position within the discipline and the socio-academic context in which we live and work. To this an equally suggestive subtitle has been added, a justification of which shall be provided below.

2. Why *Past, Present and Future of Popular Culture*?

As suggested above, through its holistic approach to culture, now generally considered as “everyday life” and not just the “High”, elitist “Culture” traditionally studied in university contexts (Williams 1973, 1997), cultural studies has gradually taken it upon itself to trace what Cuthbert refers to as the “the primary social—rather than natural—laws informing subjective experience in everyday life” (1996, 396). Particularly useful for the purposes of this volume are the semiotic approaches to this issue. Thus, Danesi and Perron regard culture as “a way of life based on a signifying order [...] that is passed [...] from one generation to the next” and which draws on the signifying order of a first community (“tribe”) (1999, 23). They complete the picture with a definition of “society”, which they perceive as “a collectivity of individuals who, although they may not all have the same tribal origins, nevertheless participate, by and large, in the signifying order of the founding or conquering tribe (or tribes)” (Danesi and Perron 1999, 24).

Such views are particularly relevant since they highlight one of the main points that both cultural studies and the present volume make, namely the blurring of the division between “High” and “low” culture, since what matters from this perspective is not the aesthetic or artistic value of cultural materials but culture understood as “the whole system of significations by which a society or a section of it understands itself and its relations with the world” (Dollimore and Sinfield, quoted in Wilson 1995, 26). It follows that cultural studies invariably takes an ideological stance, as it conceives of culture as something both inherent to, and resulting from, a given political and economic system (Wilson 1995, 34). This easily relates to the foucauldian notion of discourse (Foucault 1984) as “language in action” (Danaher et al. 2000, 31). Indeed, Stuart Hall is

widely held responsible for introducing the ideas of French theorists to the mainstream of British cultural studies, and this includes foucauldian theory—Foucault having excelled in disentangling “the ways in which signs, meanings and values help to reproduce a dominant social power” (Eagleton 2000, 221).

In turn, this widening of the concept of culture has had another side-effect, namely that the hitherto sacrosanct canonical literary text need no longer be at the centre of the research carried out within cultural studies. In fact, as Stuart Hall put it, much research has so far focused primarily on “‘neglected’ materials drawn from popular culture and the mass media, which [...] [provide] important evidence of the new stresses and directions of contemporary culture” (1996, 21; see also Williams 1979), thus demonstrating that “culture” is no longer synonymous with, but far more complex a term than, say, the literary canon. As an offshoot of this, the debate remains open as to how to refer to (and what academic status should be granted to) those studies inquiring into literary phenomena beyond the canon. At all events, in refusing to automatically deprive the “here and now” of academic worth and interest, rather than just wait for time (and a complex net of ideological and economic factors) to “canonise” some materials whilst burying others, cultural studies moves further away from the traditional humanities and comes up as a “history of the present” (Valdés-Miyares 2006, 1).

Needless to say, such achievements have come at a price. The revaluation of “neglected materials” has been so prominent that these have arguably become the flagship of cultural studies. A simple browse through the different cultural studies programmes offered by many British universities, or the titles offered by some of the most visible publishing houses leads to one conclusion: (canonical) literature has been reduced to a clearly marginal position within cultural studies (Spiropoulou 1999, 53).

Although a natural reaction in the wake of centuries of canonical tradition, this has led to harsh criticism even from certain circles within cultural studies itself. In this regard, some refer to the “banalisation” or “trivialisation” of both its contents and interests, and this criticism is perhaps most visible outside the UK (see Grossberg 2006, 22-23, who discusses the issue from an American perspective). Clearly illustrative of this critical strand is Striphas (2002), who, whilst fully recognising the merit and quality of early cultural studies research, adds that much of the research currently produced under this label is “ordinary” (an adjective that, in his view, no longer describes the object of study but research itself). Never one to mince words, Striphas largely blames the main

publishing houses for this, adding that they are after the easily sellable and not the intellectually stimulating (2002, 441-442).

Such risks do exist although they arguably apply to much of the academic world and not just cultural studies. As for the latter, and considering its output over the last few decades, it might be argued that cultural studies has come of age and that the value of literature and literary studies (as well as other artistic fields and related disciplines) has never been consciously questioned. Spiropoulou, however, calls for a rapprochement between these and cultural studies (1999, 55), making it clear that the value of canonical literature (and all other forms of "High" culture) is reaffirmed. It should be remembered, however, that such claims may be seen to misunderstand the very nature of cultural studies. Richard Hoggart himself repeatedly insisted that the belief that popular culture is worth studying does not automatically mean that it has the same (aesthetic, artistic) value as that traditionally recognised in certain key works of canonical culture (Gibson and Hartley 1998, 14-15; Schwarz 2005, 178).

And this is so because, as stated above, cultural studies does not seek to analyse the aesthetic or artistic value of the materials it studies. Thus seen, those who despise cultural studies on the grounds of the little value of the materials it analyses simply demonstrate very little knowledge of what cultural studies is or does. Moreover, it might also be argued that a rejection of the canon might prove just as dangerous as a rejection of the popular since, as also suggested above, and as the present volume makes abundantly clear, the boundaries between "High" and "low" culture are all but blurred (Spiropoulou 1999, 57).

3. About this volume

The present volume, therefore, offers an exciting collection of original papers whose common denominator is their rejection of (1) canonical culture as the only legitimate object of study; and (2) disciplinary knowledge as the only viable epistemological and methodological framework. In their markedly interdisciplinary approach to their respective object of study, and through their focus on the non-canonical nature of the latter, the different chapters make up a volume that showcases work on a wide range of cultural phenomena and materials whose relevance is no longer exclusively related to aesthetic issues. Thus seen, one may see this volume as an attempt to embrace the more socially relevant, mostly *interdisciplinary* "post-Humanities" (Badmington 2006) continuum of knowledge that the academic world is currently witnessing and to which, sadly enough, the only too often dusty environment of many (especially

southern) European Faculties of Arts has so far proved a virtually impregnable fortress.

The different chapters in the volume explore a vast range of materials from different perspectives—literature, semiotics, linguistics, film, television, gender and women's studies—bringing to the fore the ideological content and social relevance of the materials under analysis. These chapters have their origin in the 4th International SELICUP Conference, held in Palma de Mallorca, Spain, in October 2010. It must also be stated, however, that this is no ordinary conference proceedings volume. Such a volume was indeed published in 2011 (see Bastida-Rodríguez et al. 2011) although the intention was already there to produce an entirely different book that somehow managed to capture the essence of this truly fruitful academic gathering. And this is exactly what the editors now present. *De-Centring Cultural Studies. Past, Present and Future of Cultural Studies* is a selection of chapters covering topics and addressing issues which are all tightly related to each other. Although based on, or inspired by, papers actually presented at the conference, all of the authors (including several fully-consolidated international personalities and an exciting sample of new, young academic voices) have substantially re-worked their respective original papers—a process that has often involved their translation into English—to such an extent that each of the chapters in the volume can now be considered a new piece of writing in its own right.

The essays in Part I (“Theoretical Approaches to Popular Culture: Borderlands between Canonical and Popular Culture”) fittingly open this volume. Drawing on the ever exciting Catalan cultural scene, Chapters 1 and 2 point to the limitations of traditional literary studies and concepts if a full understanding is to be gained of the more recent literary (and especially poetic) developments in the area. In her essay, Picornell-Belenguer denounces the “neglected material” status of the phenomena she studies, thus highlighting both a lack of interest on the part of “orthodox” experts and the inadequacy of their theories and constructs to refer to a remarkably dynamic range of materials in which (popular?) art is tantamount to the expression of national and cultural identity. More specifically, by discussing slippery concepts such as ethnoliterature, ethnopoetics or ethnofiction, often associated with orality, collectivity and “indigenous” cultures, she argues that the debates over issues of authenticity and representativeness surrounding the cultural production of certain groups actually conceal an ethnocentric wish on the part of “canonical” disciplines and discourses to keep them in a subaltern,

marginal position, which inevitably involves diminishing their cultural value.

For her part, Pons further explores the situation, drawing on economic policy terminology to more adequately refer to, and account for, the latest—and crucially, popularised—manifestations of Catalan poetry. As she sees it, a full account of such phenomena will always be incomplete should it not address the extra-literary factors she fittingly focuses on in her chapter. Feeling that the “High” / popular culture divide, very much like “separating what is traditional from what is contemporary” (42), leads absolutely nowhere, particularly in the context of the often multi- or even trans-media phenomena she analyses, Pons openly embraces Raymond Williams’ liberating view of culture as a set “of social practices” and advocates an interdisciplinary, “hybridised” form of literary criticism that places ideology on a par with intrinsically literary aspects.

A second body of chapters follows in the volume’s Part II, entitled “Popular Culture: From the Past to the Present”. This section further questions the borders between “High” and popular culture. In this particular case, this is done by looking back at the past and exploring how the popular culture of yesteryear has influenced and inspired later “canonical” cultural materials and vice versa. This involves a(n often comparative) revision of works that may well fall into different genre categories, which once again calls for interdisciplinary approaches. That is the case of Sanz-Mingo’s paper, which offers an overview of Arthurian production through history reminding readers of the diversity of disciplines it stems from both in “High” and popular culture—from painting, music and the decorative arts to literature, cinema and television, to name only a few—and its adaptation to the social and political milieu of each specific period. Focusing specifically on recent texts such as Bernard Cornwell’s trilogy “The Warlord Chronicles” and Joseba Sarrionandía’s Arthurian short stories in Basque, the article highlights the contemporary productivity of the Arthurian myth as well as its intercultural scope.

Marta Miquel-Baldellou develops an original comparative analysis of Edgar Allan Poe’s literary work and Michael Jackson’s musical production, including his lyrics, video-clips, and short films. The author finds interesting intertextual connections between both popular figures, and she approaches their common thematic interests (consumerism, love, crime, and revenge, amongst others), as well as the settings, motifs, time frameworks and discourse modalities activated by Poe and Jackson.

Amores’s chapter analyses a renowned Spanish writer’s (Juan Valera, 1824-1905) literary adaptation of a folktale. Under a pseudonym, and following a trend started by some widely acclaimed 18th and 19th century