

READING INTO CULTURAL STUDIES

EDITED BY
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ROUTLEDGE



Reading into Cultural Studies revisits a selection of key texts central to the formation of cultural studies as a discipline, and as a project. These texts address questions of power, ideology and the possibilities and limits of resistance.

However, the essays in this book are not purely celebratory. Each study is critically examined in a number of ways – for its research strategy, its implicit theories of power and ideology, for the empirical evidence it draws on and its conceptual framework. Together, the essays provide an introduction to some of the central debates and issues in cultural studies.

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Edited by MARKER and BEZZER

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Martin Barker and Anne Beezer

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Reading into Cultural Studies

Recent developments in the field of cultural studies have tended to focus on issues of subjectivity, audience power, cultural activity and the enduring power of ordinary culture. In the process the concerns of earlier texts, such as power, ideology and the possibilities and limits of resistance, have been marginalised. By revisiting some of the key early texts, this book aims to foreground the approaches and concerns of these earlier texts – texts which were central to the formation of cultural studies as a discipline, and as a project.

Each of the eleven chapters takes one of these key texts, revisits and re-evaluates it with the benefit of hindsight. Each study is critically examined in a number of ways, for its research strategy, its implicit theories of power and ideology, for the empirical evidence it draws on and its conceptual framework. But most importantly, the contributors draw attention to the implications for action and the possibilities for change.

Reading into Cultural Studies shows how the history of cultural studies can now be explored through a critique of its founding texts. It provides a useful introduction to the central debates and issues, demonstrating how the discipline has changed and developed over the years.

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Introduction: What's in a text?

Martin Barker and Anne Beezer

Learning about cultural studies in the 1990s is a very different enterprise from what it was to learn about it in the 1970s when the bulk of its current lecturers took it up, often with a touch of missionary enthusiasm. This may sound a terribly obvious thing to say, but it is worth charting some of the differences between now and then – because perhaps they are not all as obvious as might seem. In no particular order, we offer some of the changes that strike us as significant.

First, there was a sheer sense of being explorers. Whole new areas and arenas of popular culture and the mass media were being opened up, and methods of exploring them tried out. Who would be the first to have a go at, say, soap operas, or sitcoms, or music papers, or fashions? What would they draw on? What connections would they suggest?

It wasn't that we were the first to take popular culture seriously – the critics and moralists had done that for years. It wasn't being celebratory, either – there were deep suspicions of the ideological role and implications of most kinds of popular culture. It was, more, believing that they deserved systematic scrutiny, that we could only understand their political significance if we had systematic ways of looking at them.

Inevitably that sense of newness has declined. Of course there are many phenomena and kinds of culture still unstudied, but for most things there are now good precedents. Students coming into cultural studies now will always find dauntingly large reading lists awaiting them, and they are proliferating amazingly fast at the moment. But what about that sense of 'systems of looking' – what has happened to that? The answer to that, we think, is more complicated.

Second, in those tentative early days, in most places cultural studies

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set its face against being a 'discipline', a closed, internally validated body of knowledge and ideas. Cultural studies was a street urchin of a subject area, nicking other people's handkerchiefs when it suited – but using them to shine shoes or patch clothes, thumbing its nose at academic manners, being cheeky to everyone. English, sociology, film studies, later psychology and especially psychoanalysis, bits of political (and especially state) theory, and so on – all were plundered for whatever we needed, at the same time as we challenged their status as 'disciplines'. At the same time, relations of other but equally important kinds went on with a variety of radical political movements: socialist organisations from time to time, the women's movement, anti-racist organisations, local culture and arts organisations.

Relations with these were, to use the jargon of the time, 'uneven', ranging from outright involvement in campaigns to engaging in debates about their significance for us. (A notable absence: with the exception of the 1984–5 miners' strike, which did engage the energies, both political and intellectual, of very many people within cultural studies, the truth is that there has been only marginal engagement with trade union activities. Even the lecturers' unions, both NATFHE and the AUT, have not 'engaged' much cultural studies activism.)

What is important here is not that these involvements have just declined, though they have obviously not gone away. No, what matters is that in the 1970s it was almost a *sine qua non* of being involved in cultural studies that we should also be involved within this spectrum of radical-political initiatives. That just isn't true in the same way in the 1990s, and certainly not for many of our students.

And that points to a third changed component: that in the 1970s there was in many ways a sense of a shared project: debated, but none the less shared. Of course that is easier to maintain when things are small – though there was very little in the way of a national network of people in the field until well into the 1980s. The Cultural Studies Network, founded between Birmingham, London and Bristol in the late 1970s, had only very patchy connections with other places; and despite its best intentions the Association for Cultural Studies which followed it, apart from organising some very useful conferences, did not consolidate the links very much. Still, with all its limits, the agenda of issues debated at the Network meetings is revealing. It ranged across how courses could be developed, the politics of different teaching styles and methods, the politics of cultural investigation, the meaning of cultural studies becoming a 'subject' with syllabus, assessment, etc., how to intervene

with the critical tools at our disposal in various cultural and political issues of the time, and so on.

All this, in a real sense, is now history. For students and others encountering cultural studies for the first time in the 1990s, how should they learn about it? In one sense, it is all too easy. For cultural studies, rather like a football star at 25, is busy writing its autobiography. Histories of cultural studies are becoming common, either as whole books or as brief sketches.

WRITING HISTORIES AND MAKING 'TRADITIONS'

If the publication of histories of a discipline is a sign of its coming of age, then cultural studies has undoubtedly emerged from adolescence into maturity. When Richard Johnson attempted to chart the nexus of issues and theoretical crosscurrents which had given rise to cultural studies, there was an ambivalence built into his title 'What is Cultural Studies Anyway?'¹ This has been replaced by a clearer sense of identity, albeit one that is fragmented. Take Graeme Turner's and Patrick Brantlinger's histories of British cultural studies as examples.² They both locate its beginnings in the post-war breakdown of the consensus about the direction and value of British cultural life. The critique of ideas of 'mass culture', and the re-evaluation of 'ordinary culture' which characterised the work of Raymond Williams, Richard Hoggart and E. P. Thompson, emerged from this broken consensus. *Culture and Society*, *The Uses of Literacy* and *The Making of the English Working Class* became the foundational texts of an interdisciplinary cultural studies.³

Both histories identify *Culture and Society* as the key text which 'set the agenda for cultural studies' (Brantlinger, p. 38) and whose influence 'has arguably been more profound than any other' (Turner, p. 52). Brantlinger maintains that its significance is due to the way it demonstrated 'how the multiple concepts signified by the key word "culture" arise in key debates about industrialization and democratization'; and Turner is largely in agreement that the book's strength and singularity was its pursuit of the connections between cultural products and cultural relations.

Accounts like these of the emergence of cultural studies, which give texts such as *Culture and Society* a foundational status, prompted Raymond Williams to recount a more 'hidden history' of cultural studies.⁴ He argued that the publication of *Culture and Society* was the outcome of his and others' engagement in the various adult education

movements of the 1930s and 1940s. Williams insists that to privilege key texts in an account of the emergence of cultural studies is to construct an idealist history which misleads because it breaks the connection between the social formation which gave rise to cultural studies and the project that resulted from that formation. This formation, Williams argues, was made up of the self-educating organisations of working people whose project was to make institutionally-derived knowledge relevant to their own experience and activities. And in this context, Williams stresses that 'making relevant' was not a matter of 'enlightening the masses' but the much more radical project of building an open-access democratic culture of an educated kind. In other words, cultural studies was not a detached body of knowledge which could 'do good' to people. It could only exist and grow through its dependence on the 'common people' whom it served.

It seems to us that there are a number of problems in Williams's account, though it is surely an important corrective to any primarily text-centred history. The first problem is his picture of post-war adult education. His depiction of this as simply working-class self-education, somehow indicative of a wider political objective of democratisation of power, is a romanticised one – and that has wider implications for how we should see cultural studies. For in his picture, 'education' – of the right kind – takes on an heroic role in empowering working-class people.⁵ (By implication also, education of the wrong kind is particularly deceitful and dangerous.) Something of the same 'heroic' role is given in some cases today to ACCESS – as though getting more black, or working-class, or other 'underprivileged' individuals into higher education ought somehow to alter the position of the groups from which they come.

The second problem is in Williams's account of who controlled the curriculum of adult education. In his view, what was important was the way in which the working-class 'clients' for their courses made demands of their tutors: in particular, demands for relevance to their lives. We are not saying this was untrue, or wrong; but implicit in Williams's account is a claim that this demanding relationship thereby made the resultant courses somehow liberatory. That could only be certainly so on three conditions: first, that the shop stewards etc. who came to those courses came knowing what kinds of knowledge they 'needed' in order to strengthen their own democratic participation in their culture (and of course, what would count as democratic participation is not easy to say). Second, that in some meaningful sense they came as 'representatives' of their class – but especially in the 1950s,

with the fragmentation and depoliticisation of class struggle that was gaining ground, that is hard to conceive. Third, that the courses offered could somehow be cut off from the institutional framework, and become and remain relatively free from the demands that being-an-adult-education-course carries with it. That last was the most likely in the 1950s. It is the least likely now, given the way successive Conservative governments have put the control of all forms of education centre-stage, politically. And were by the early 1990s well on the way to abolishing all but vocational adult education.

None the less, it is this project which Williams believed was in danger of being forgotten as cultural studies moves from the margins of educational provision into the more mainstream academic culture of higher education institutions. Williams warned that this is not just a matter of restricting access to cultural studies approaches to those who have followed the predominantly middle-class educational path of school and college or university education, but also involves pushing cultural studies into an academic enclave where institutional pressures force the setting up of discipline boundaries. Such a move will reinstate the conditions which cultural studies originally worked to transform.

On the face of it, a book of readings such as this, which revisits key texts in the emergence of cultural studies, appears to embody those very tendencies which Williams opposed. To locate cultural studies in 'canonical texts' runs the very real risk of effacing the links between the social formations which brought about the making of cultural studies. However, our intention is not to raise the texts we examine in this reader to canonical status. We think they are worth revisiting – and we think *students* should visit them – because, despite differences of emphasis and issue, they shared a common project which connects with the most valuable part of Williams's argument, and one which we think is now, unfortunately, in retreat. It is a project of thinking through the implications of extending the term 'culture' to include activities and meanings of ordinary people, precisely those constituencies excluded from participation in culture when its elitist definition holds sway. To return to this history and to reappraise the directions proposed for understanding the relations between power, ideology and resistance is not, therefore, an academicist exercise. Rather, we want it to be seen as a means of taking stock of the project of cultural studies and, with the benefit of hindsight, re-evaluating those directions.

Why have we repeatedly called this a 'project'? Because always implicit in early analyses was the question: what can be done about the oppressive relations we are revealing? What forces are there, even if

only potentially, that could lead to liberation? What strategies suggest themselves for supporting emancipatory forces? And, in consequence, what will count as liberation and emancipation? In short, there was a fundamental agenda in early cultural studies which set up broad oppositions between the concepts of power/ideology and culture/participation. However crude and unsatisfactory these terms may be (as a number of the essays in this volume themselves effectively show), that agenda was very different from the one which we see emergent in cultural studies now.

RE-EVALUATING TEXTS

How does this relate to the question of 'texts'? An odd process seems to us to be under way at the moment – a process of shucking off the past, even at the same time as 'histories' of that are being written – histories which seem to justify the new agendas in cultural studies. But what is being shucked off is just what we feel should be rescued. Putting it crudely, the texts of the past need a different kind of critique than the ones which they are mainly currently getting.

The publication of histories of cultural studies is just one indication of the current re-evaluation of the project of cultural studies. Many of the authors whose work is examined in this reader, together with others such as Angela McRobbie, have been engaged in this re-evaluation. And as part of this, the 'authority' of all texts, and the centrality that was once accorded to them in cultural studies, has been questioned. People whose work was pretty central to the early development of cultural studies have one after another been offering self-critiques resulting in the shedding of chunks of their past thinking. In no particular order: David Morley, Ien Ang, Paul Willis, Janice Radway, Angela McRobbie, John Fiske and Dick Hebdige have all in recent work shed some of their previous ideas. And there are common threads to these self-critiques. Angela McRobbie, for example, argues that 'gradually there has been a marginalization of narrow text-based analyses in place of a more contextualised approach which recognises the multiplicity of meanings and readings which any one text or image is capable of generating'. The critique of text-based approaches indicates, she argues, 'a movement away from the text in all its ideological glory, and a recognition of the fact that texts do not simply assert their meanings on "unsuspecting" readers and viewers'.⁶

This movement away from the 'Althusserian moment' in cultural studies, in which ideology was conceived in monolithic terms, is also