

Cultural studies: a critical introduction

Simon During

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Cultural studies: a critical introduction

Cultural Studies: A Critical Introduction is a wide-ranging and stimulating introduction to cultural studies from its beginnings to the global field that it is becoming today. It begins by describing cultural studies' social and theoretical histories and contexts, and then presents a series of short essays on important areas, designed to provoke discussion and raise questions. Each thematic section examines and explains a key topic.

Sections include:

- The discipline
- Time
- Space
- Media and the public sphere
- Identity
- Sexuality and gender
- Value

Cultural Studies: A Critical Introduction will be very useful in classrooms but will also appeal to anyone with an interest in keeping up or familiarising themselves with cultural studies in its contemporary forms.

Simon During is Professor of English at the Johns Hopkins University. He is editor of *The Cultural Studies Reader* (2nd edition, Routledge 1999) and most recently author of *Modern Enchantments: The Cultural Power of Secular Magic* (2003).

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Introduction

This book is not quite the usual introduction to cultural studies – an academic field that we can define, without messing about, as the engaged analysis of contemporary cultures. Cultural studies is *engaged* in three different senses. First, in the sense that it is not neutral in relation to the exclusions, injustices and prejudices that it observes. It tends to position itself on the side of those to whom social structures offer least, so that here ‘engaged’ means political, critical. Second, it is engaged in that it aims to enhance and celebrate cultural experiences: to communicate enjoyment of a wide variety of cultural forms in part by analysing them and their social underpinnings. And third, and this marks its real difference from other kinds of academic work, it aims to deal with culture as a part of everyday life, without objectifying it. In fact cultural studies aspires to join – to engage in – the world, itself.

Most introductions to cultural studies focus on the discipline’s historical development, usually tracing it from its beginnings in Britain in the 1960s as a mix of left-wing sociology, adult education and literary criticism, to its current dissemination across much of the global academy, and they go on to provide an account of its basic methods and interests. But the bulk of this book, while it does not ignore questions of disciplinary history and method, consists of a series of short essays on the discipline’s core topics, designed to stimulate discussion and thought in the classroom, although not only in the classroom. It is not aimed at absolute beginners (although I’d hope some novices will find it stimulating) but more at those who are feeling their way further into the subject on the basis of some preliminary study, as well as at old hands intrigued by what I hope is a fresh take on the field.

I have chosen to structure the book as a series of essays on specific topics because my experience in class has shown me that the most effective way to teach cultural studies is to

draw on students' cultural interests, and to show how academic work can extend those interests and offer critical insight into them. The short essay is an ideal way of doing that. In broader terms, this is a book designed to get students into cultural studies by showing how the discipline helps us to understand and orientate ourselves towards a wide range of institutions, media, concepts and formations – from television to multiculturalism; from cultural heritage to queer politics. To reach this point, however, in its first section, the book begins by providing a brief overview of the discipline's past and present; its interactions with other related academic disciplines; its connections to changes in tertiary education; as well as some of the key debates that have shaped it.

Part 1

THE DISCIPLINE

Going global

Perhaps the most remarkable feature of cultural studies today is the way that it is becoming global – along with trade, finance, communications and the university system as a whole. It's taught, in one form or other, in most national academic systems. Which means that, wherever you are coming from, there will be people in the field working on material that belongs to 'another culture' than your own. This presents a challenge. On the one hand, as the discipline is globalised it becomes harder to take any particular cultural context as standard, let alone as universal. The horizons of dialogue, exchange and research are extended. This fits in well with the discipline's orientation, since it has never claimed scientific objectivity and rarely assumes that it possesses analytic methods that hold good across different cultures. On the other hand, to the degree that regional cultures are in fact analysed around the world in terms of a set of methods and theories first developed in the West, the discipline becomes complicit in the logic by which regional differences are reduced under the guise of accepting them as differences. And the sheer variety of topics and histories brought into the discipline through globalisation, along with the consequent loss of shared references and competencies, threatens to disrupt its capacity to draw practitioners into a shared project.

The notion that the amount and specialisation of culture- and knowledge-production had made a single and comprehensive overview of society impossible was already commonplace in the eighteenth century (see Barrell 1992). In cultural studies these days, however, that sense is felt less in terms of loss than of confusion. For example, in a 1998 volume of the flagship journal *Cultural Studies*, one can find a traditional literary-critical essay on *Hamlet* and Marx; a sociological essay on consumerism and the

Louvre; an archivally based piece on colonial science in South India; a feminist critique of the theory of cultural 'hybridity'; an essay on Bob Marley and black transnationalism; a contextualising historical essay on Fu Manchu, the Chinese baddie hero of a number of popular early twentieth-century novels by 'Sax Rohmer'; an essay on breast cancer and the 'public body' in the USA; as well as self-reflective essays on the discipline itself.

Faced with all this, it is easy to feel like an intellectual tourist dropping into topics which may be enticing in their sheer exoticness but towards which one has little interest or responsibility. No wonder outsiders sometimes roll their eyes at cultural studies' ambitions and shapelessness. One answer to this is to think of cultural studies' teachers and students as agents for connections between globally dispersed events and flows more or less vaguely in the interests of a transnational movement against exploitation and centrism. But it has to be said that that kind of academic *noblesse oblige* risks increasing the gap between what such topics mean to cultural studies and what they mean on the ground – where what humanities academics think hardly matters. More to the point, it risks the engagement in culture that is one of the field's defining features.

Culture today

For all that, diffusion is not the key to global cultural studies. Mobility is. The kind of cultural formations of most interest to the discipline are becoming increasingly mobile everywhere. This is true in the literal sense that they tend to move across distances and borders, but also in the sense that their relations with their social and material settings (the economy, politics, education, technology and so on) change so quickly and thoroughly, although at different paces and in different ways in different places. It's also true in the sense that sectors and genres internal to cultures are interacting so dynamically with one another. Culture is not a thing or even a system: it's a set of transactions, processes, mutations, practices, technologies, institutions, out of which things and events (such as movies, poems or world wrestling bouts) are produced, to be experienced, lived out and given meaning and value to in different ways within the unsystematic network of differences and mutations from which they emerged to start with. (Again this model strikes a less than contemporary note: the basis of such an understanding of culture first appears in the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche's work at the end of the nineteenth century.)

For cultural studies today, cultural objects are simultaneously 'texts' (that is, they have meaning) *and* events *and* experiences, produced out of, and thrown back into, a social force field constituted unevenly by power flows, status hierarchies and opportunities for many kinds of transportation, identification and pleasure. They are also social institutions, some based in the state, others in the market or in so-called civil society. Cultures travel across

geographical borders; they merge and separate; they cross and disrupt political and social divisions, and also, sometimes, strengthen them. Cultural technologies are born and die. Capital and fashions ebb and flow through different cultural forms. Some genres become specialised and 'extreme', others sweep the world.

So it often seems as if, because 'culture' no longer refers to a specific set of things and because cultural markets are so pervasive, it – and hence cultural studies – can be just about anything (see Readings 1996, 17). Certainly as we shall see it often threatens to exceed its limits and take over alternative concepts such as society. Despite all this, cultural studies does not in fact cover culture with equal attention to all its modes. It has mainly directed itself to a particular set of cultural formations – those that connect most directly to its mainly secular, middle-class, leftist, youngish (or wannabe young) more or less Eurocentric practitioners. Hence, it has tended to neglect, for instance, religion; food; sport; hobby-sports such as fishing and train-spotting; middle-brow and 'kitsch' culture, especially that part which is family-based and of most interest to the middle aged such as home improvement and gardening. For different reasons it has neglected high culture itself.

Then, too, study of culture itself belongs to culture. We cultural studies practitioners are making culture, even if from within a fairly highly organised institution – the education system – and even if our political ends, which some would describe as the democratisation of culture, impose upon us certain constraints. At any rate cultural studies' concept of 'culture' breaks with the concepts of culture that have been dominant in the past. In particular, in losing its intimate connection with traditional high arts, the discipline tends to regard all cultural practices and objects as value-equivalent. Indeed it is a child of a society where such a levelling view has an economic function, namely the increase of cultural consumption of all kinds. Nor does it adhere to the idea promulgated by followers of the great, eighteenth-century German philosopher Immanuel Kant hold – that at culture's core lies the aesthetic: the domain of activities that are 'ends in themselves' and not of use for some other purpose, as, for instance, are food or buildings. Likewise the older, anthropological sense of 'culture' is exhausted, by which the term referred to the inherited, primarily non-modern and uncontested values, beliefs and practices that organise individuals' relations to, and participation in, communities.

Method

Once these older concepts of culture begin to retreat, and once culture is treated globally, method becomes a real problem for the academic study of culture. What kind of concepts and practices should we bring to our material? Interviews? Statistical analysis? Philosophical conceptualising? Political critique? Close readings of 'texts' (which might include songs, TV shows as well as novels)? In fact it is difficult to say

much more about cultural studies method except that, in a very general way, it is both a theoretical and empirical discipline, and, at its best, is both at the same time. It need not be organised around method partly because commercial, globalised culture is so diffuse and fluid, and generates so many positions from which to engage it, and because, in cultural studies, theories and methods themselves adhere to the logic of fashion (if mediated by the education system), passing through it continually. For all that, cultural studies does consistently drift back towards the interpretative and empathetic methods of traditional hermeneutic disciplines, including the literary criticism to which (as we shall see) it owes so much – methods which, paradoxically, disavow the rigidity of method.

When, nonetheless, the concept of ‘method’, drawn from the social sciences (and routinely demanded in academics’ research-funding applications), is made central to cultural studies’ identity, it quickly becomes highly generalised. In his excellent book, *Inside Culture*, Nick Couldry, for instance, places method, which he thinks of as a ‘path of reasoning’, at the heart of cultural studies, since it provides the shared values or ‘common framework with which we can recognise that we are in dialogue’ (Couldry 2000, 143). This is obviously to differ from those who (like myself) think of cultural studies as basically anti-methodological, but it is worth noting where this stance takes Couldry. For him, cultural studies has a tripartite method: it is materialist and reflective (that is, it continually examines its own development and processes); it is anti-positivist (that is, it does not believe that culture can be accounted for in objective facts); and it is theoretically eclectic. In a sense this is to give the game away since it does not spell out a method unique to cultural studies. The claim that cultural studies is method-based expresses a particular orientation within it – or maybe just a hope.

Given this it seems natural to ask: if a discrete and stable set of methods do not characterise cultural studies, and if culture is so totalising and fluid a concept, where does cultural studies find its centre of gravity? One response is to contend that the theory established during the period of cultural studies’ emergence (rather than method as such) provides a *lingua franca* for the global cultural studies community: the common ground from which debate, teaching and research can proceed, albeit without being an overarching monopoly. And there can be little doubt that much cultural studies shares an overlapping set of proper name references (Raymond Williams, Antonio Gramsci, Michel de Certeau, Stuart Hall, Michel Foucault, Edward Said, Paul Gilroy and so on) as collected in the standard textbooks, although many of these names mean more in Anglophone or French cultural studies than they do in, say, Asian cultural studies.

Another, more rewarding response would be to say that cultural studies is united not by a discrete set of theoretical references but by dual impulses which are vaguer than a method: a will to interpret the culture within the protocols of academic knowledge (providing evidence and citations for arguments; referring to well-recognised general

concepts; implicitly or explicitly placing one's work within the disciplinary field; exposing one's writing to debate, and engaging in debate with others, etc.) as well as a (political) drive to connect with everyday life as lived outside the academy, and especially as lived by those with relatively little power or status. Indeed cultural studies at its best deals mainly with quite non-technical terms such as 'popular culture', 'racism', 'globalisation', 'heterosexuality' – words which have good equivalents in various languages and which are actively used outside the academy. But even here cultural studies' globalism can cause problems: some of these terms at least (multiculturalism, queer) have different circulations, references and connotations in different parts of the world, and these slight differences are easily lost sight of. Certainly too much insistence on cultural studies' own 'common culture' is likely to fall prey to the difficulties that always befall the quest for unity and coherence – the passing over of internal differences, the retreat into generality and abstraction, and the almost invisible transformation of supposed common features into regulatory norms.

The fallback position on defining cultural studies is nominalist: cultural studies is just what names itself as, and is recognised as, cultural studies. But we don't have to be quite so minimalist: I would point to two further features which help characterise the field, one which is recognised by Nick Couldry, the other which is not. The first characteristic feature of cultural studies is that it is, as I say, an *engaged* study of culture. By engagement – let me repeat – I mean a sensitivity to the ways in which culture is (in part) a field of power-relations involving centres and peripheries, status hierarchies, connections to norms that impose repressions or marginalisations. But I also mean a commitment to celebrating or critiquing cultural forms (often in relation to the social field in which they are produced), to producing accounts of culture that can be fed back into cultural production and/or to producing new connections between various cultural forms and people (mainly, of course, students) in 'ordinary life'.

It is because cultural studies is engaged that it belongs to the humanities rather than to the social sciences which claim to analyse their objects *objectively*. And it is because it is engaged that it can so easily become a factor in cultural production itself. Cultural studies has become an element in cultural work across many fields. For instance, the young black British artists of the 1980s – Chila Burman, Sonia Boyce, Isaac Julien, Keith Piper – who were engrossed by the theory being then produced by Homi Bhabha, Kobena Mercer, Paul Gilroy and others (McRobbie 1999, 6). Angela McRobbie has also noted that many of the young journalists working on the new magazines of the nineties aimed at young women had some training in media and cultural studies, which helped provide the framework in which they negotiated their workplace (McRobbie 1999, 28). American novelists such as Don DeLillo and Jonathan Franzen are familiar with contemporary cultural theory, and to some degree undertake to instantiate it in their novels. Indeed in countries such as Australia and the UK, cultural studies is providing the basic understanding and interpretation of contemporary culture and society in art, design

and even fashion schools, and, as such, is presupposed in much work in these fields, especially in avant-garde work. The political sense of engagement merges surprisingly easily into this more neutral, almost economic sense of engagement.

The second ideal feature of cultural studies (which is recognised by Couldry) is that it ought to be self-reflective. It needs continually critically to examine itself, and in particular its relations to the educational system on the one side, and the non-academic cultural institutions on the other. This self-reflection is not so much a matter of method as an institutional requirement. Cultural studies needs to manage constant shifts in relations between its own home – the university – and transformations in the wider culture outside, and that need, presented to it by the sheer fact of its existence and its will to survival in the educational system, constitutes part of its project as it jostles older disciplines and long-established understandings of culture and education. This self-reflection routinely takes the form of an examination of its own history. Is cultural studies a specific discipline or does it exist across or outside established disciplines? Is it, for instance, better regarded not as a discipline but as a critical practice? In cultural studies such questions have not been secondary, they have helped to generate the discipline itself.

Disciplinarity

So questions about method and coherence quickly slide into questions of disciplinarity, debate over which remains fierce. Tony Bennett, for instance, has argued strongly that the incapacity to form a proper discipline will be regarded as institutional failure (Bennett 1998b, 533–534), while the consensus among those who came to the field early was that it ought to remain outside the constraints of disciplinarity. From that point of view, disciplinarity restricts the variety of topics, interests, positions, contexts and methods that the field can accommodate. There is no clear answer to this debate, partly because the status and function of disciplinarity in the humanities is changing. Let us remind ourselves that academic disciplines in the humanities and social sciences have never been unitary formations: they integrate various methods, objects of inquiry and professional interests. There is an important sense in which all disciplines are inter-disciplines. Once established they are compelled to emphasise differentiation and autonomy yet they remain joined to one another by at least some shared interests and methods – one can take the complex entanglements of and disjunctions between literary studies and history as an example. Discrete disciplines also remain connected through sub-disciplines that permeate across and connect their boundaries: social theory for instance belongs simultaneously to sociology and to cultural studies.

More importantly, disciplines are not simply defined by their intellectual projects: as Bennett recognises, they are institutions linked to units (departments, schools, faculties) in universities. It is difficult to generalise about disciplinarity and university