

INTRODUCTION TO CONTEMPORARY CULTURAL STUDIES

Edited by David Punter



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INTRODUCTION TO CONTEMPORARY CULTURAL STUDIES

This is the first in an occasional series of introductions to modern studies under the general editorship of Professor Malcolm Bradbury. Longman has also published *Introduction to American Studies*, edited by Malcolm Bradbury and Howard Temperley (1981).

PREFACE

I began collecting together the various essays which comprise this book in 1982. As a survey of British culture since the war, and of the study of that culture, it is obviously patchy; in particular, there is almost no attention to film, partly because it is hoped this will be the subject of a further volume in the same series.

Since 1982, many features of British cultural life—in the widest sense of culture—have changed; many more have not, and it may well be the sense of persistent, grinding atrophy which rings truer than claims for mobility, development, or even determinate regression. As I see it, it is the task of the cultural critic to attempt to assess, in relation to the records of culture but also in relation to the representative experience of the individual, the sociopsychological meanings which lie behind the observable data of change and stasis; and there are many attempts in these pages to do just that.

My own principal observation of the last three years has been of moving into a society where the quotidian experience of freedom is ephemeral; and where, instead, the reified forms of hierarchy, which themselves represent a power proposed as unchallengeable, loom ever larger on the horizon. It needs hardly to be pointed out that this tendency is in direct contradiction of governmental rhetoric; but there is nothing too surprising in that. In absense, it is as though we are no longer invited to deal for ourselves with the cardinal differences involved in being human – differences of race, culture, gender, age, class – but instead we are invited to view these differences as massive dead forms, around which we must tread with care for fear of awakening ghosts. I would interpret this psychoanalytically as a phenomenon of bad dependence, a robbing of the potency of action, and a consequent reliance on quasi-parental authority writ large; but others, from their different subject positions, may of course see things differently.

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Introduction

CULTURE AND CHANGE

DAVID PUNTER

This book is designed as an introduction to the study of contemporary culture. I hope that it will be of value not only to students beginning courses at universities, polytechnics and other colleges, but also to many other readers, and in two slightly different ways. On the one hand, it provides an introduction to some of the ways in which contemporary culture actually is approached, and thus to some of the methods which are used, some of the theories which are relevant, and some of the ways of working which have been found productive through educational experience. On the other, in the course of this the book naturally provides an introduction to some of the basic forms in which that culture actually occurs: forms in the sense of media - there are accounts here which are based in literature, in television, in advertising, in music, and so forth - and in the sense of significant topics and themes, the concerns which structure contemporary culture - divisions of race, class, gender; ways in which we imagine the past, the present, the future; contemporary hopes and anxieties; the real social structures within which we live and within which our subjectivity is formed.

In collecting these essays, I have tried to keep in mind two basic co-ordinates: that 'contemporary' be interpreted as covering the period after the Second World War, and that the focus of each essay be British. In both cases, it is the exceptions which prove the rule: phenomena which affect us today cannot be explained without reference back to the recent past; and there are areas of British culture which make no sense without considerable reference to the international forces which have operated and continue to operate here, on it. In soliciting the essays, I chose not to suggest a definition of 'culture' to which all the writers might want to adhere, because I suspected that this would be constraining, and that, for readers in search of a definition, I could offer more by allowing the writers to work within their own parameters. I recognize that this means that more definitional work must reside with the reader; but this seems to me precisely the point.

I should also say that I have found the process of collecting and editing the volume immensely stimulating. In some cases I found myself with topics on my hands which, in my view, required attention; in other cases I knew of writers and thinkers from whom I very much wanted a contribution; in still others, I was aware of schools of thought, working tendencies, which, I believed, should be represented if the book were going to offer a realistic account of the work in contemporary cultural studies which is proceeding and developing in the various appropriate sites. The essays emerged from these various beginnings. I made one more comment to the contributors: which was that I very much wanted them to consider their own choice of form. There are forms which have become conventionally associated with the 'academic', and others which have become associated with specific ideologies: I wanted some of these to be represented, but I also wanted to offer a space within which individual writers could select the appropriate shape for their comments, something particularly important in a field where there is, of necessity, constant change and a constant search for the appropriate form amid the diversity of forms offered us by the wider proliferation of media. Only the reader, of course, will be able to decide for him- or herself on whether this tactic has produced useful results.

In writing this introduction – an introduction to an introduction – there are various things which I have decided not to do, because they have turned out to be unnecessary. It is not necessary, for instance, for me to attempt an account of contemporary social history, because this is provided in Arthur Marwick's essay; nor of the genesis and development of contemporary cultural studies, because this is offered by Tony Dunn. Likewise the future directions of contemporary cultural studies are spoken of eloquently in the fourth section of the book. So what I have instead chosen to do is, first, to describe in brief the essays which follow, and the sections into which they fall; and second, to take up some of the themes which seem to me to offer links and bridges between the essays, and to make some suggestions about how they might relate to our general cultural preoccupations, and how they might provide keys for unlocking some of the secrets of contemporary cultural life.

The book is divided into four sections; that was not my original plan, but has emerged as appropriate in the light of the material which the contributors have provided. I am therefore assuming that it reflects, in some sense, the reality of the study and research processes which the book represents. Section A, called 'Cultural frameworks', contains three essays which give us some essential backgrounds: to British social history since the Second World War, to the development of the media during that period, to the parallel and dialectically related evolution of cultural studies. Even in this section, there is no claim that the 'coverage' offered is comprehensive: and certainly there is no such

claim in the three sections which follow.

Section B, called 'Cultural studies and methodology', offers three accounts of developments in the pedagogy of cultural and communication studies. The third section, the largest in the book, is called 'Topics in contemporary culture', and offers a range of such topics, treated in diverse ways: television comedy, science fiction, comics, school textbooks, rock music, youth styles are all themes which appear here in various guises, as do many of the key political issues of these years: racism, the clash of different cultures, gender, education, fears of terminal war. The fourth section contains four essays which appear to me to suggest future directions in which the study of contemporary culture might go. I should like now to say a few more words about each of these essays, concentrating where possible on connections between them, in order to help with the construction of meaningful shapes and patterns which is, I take it, the task of interpretation.

Arthur Marwick's 'A social history of Britain 1945–1983' (Ch. 1) offers us precisely that; but also much more. The essay serves, for instance, as a warning against over-simplification. It is all too easy to try to read the post-war period as a unified whole; by calling attention to the breaks and changes of direction which have characterized social evolution and social policy during that period Marwick helps us with the task of seeing history in terms of 'significant wholes'. Perhaps most significant of all, and certainly controversial, is his assertion that the Falklands War marks a break in history, and thus in our culture; this underlines a sense, which can also be found in later essays in the volume, that we might be witnessing a critical moment in British culture, a moment when acceptances which have come to seem 'traditional' may no longer be holding, and when the task of contemporary interpretation thus becomes all the more vital.

It is, however, true that that sense of the 'critical moment' is one which has tended to recur in the increasingly fast-moving world of contemporary culture; and Roger Sales, in his essay 'An introduction to broadcasting history' (Ch. 2), reminds us of several such moments in the recent past, and above all of the critical impact which broadcasting has had on political life and on social attitudes. In particular Sales helps us to notice again that forms of culture which we have all too easily come to see as 'natural' are, of course, nothing of the sort: his accounts of the genesis of television, of the battles between state monopoly and so-called 'independent broadcasting' call to mind the fact that things could have been otherwise, that at those critical cultural moments decisions are taken - or evaded - and that the outcome of those decisions is related to a complex interplay of individuals and social forces. There are languages in the criticism of contemporary culture which talk in terms of 'strategies of power', and other languages which might prefer the terminology of 'corridors of power': we too, as readers and critics, have our choices to take about the appropriateness of those languages and of the ideologies which underlie them.

The name of Richard Hoggart occurs in Marwick's essay and in Sales's; it recurs, with other key names, in Tony Dunn's account of 'The evolution of cultural studies' (Ch. 3), which moves us from the culture itself towards the actual forms and modes in which it has been and is being interpreted. Contemporary cultural studies has been, from its outset, a primary site for intellectual contestation, and Dunn gives us a sense of what that contestation has been about. In particular, he picks out the way in which the study of British culture has been informed and influenced from the outset - and particularly through the influence of New Left Review - by theory transmitted from continental Europe, and this despite the overwhelming fertilization of British culture, not by Europe but by the United States. Behind this curious collision, there are obviously important forces at work, and they have partly structured 'indigenous' British criticism (Hoggart, Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall, the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies).

The essays in Section B can be seen as more practical accounts of some of the conflicts which Dunn outlines. Anne Beezer, Jean Grimshaw and Martin Barker demonstrate for us (Ch. 4) the fact, so easy to forget, that theory is not the same as method: we do not simply grasp a theory in its totality, rather we come to see its meaningfulness – or lack of it – by testing its efficacy on actual objects of study: here advertisements, women's magazines, teenage reading matter. There is also a significant polemic behind this essay, one which has enduring importance for the criticism of contemporary culture: do those theories which set out to demonstrate for us the ways in which subjectivity is 'constructed' by societal forces really act to generate discriminating descriptions of the 'reading act'? In both Dunn's essay and this one, the name of Althusser occurs, and we are invited to consider whether the model of relations between society and the subject which Althusserian Marxism offers is adequate; and, indeed, adequate for what specific purposes? Beezer, Grimshaw and Barker also write within a context where a major determining factor is the evolution of feminism; and some of their arguments reappear, in different guises, later in the book.

In 'Critiques of culture: a course' (Ch. 5), Jon Cook further narrows and intensifies the focus by describing not merely a specific course in cultural studies, but also some of the difficult emotional content of pedagogic activity. The intellectual context in which this course emerged is clearly spelled out, and relates back to dominant figures already mentioned in the book: Marx, Freud, Marcuse, Althusser, the feminist theorists and writers might provide us, if we attend to their work with discrimination, with tools for analysis, though these tools will be useless unless we also attend to the actual process whereby they may be transferred into the hands of students, rather than being used

as blunt instruments. There is a genuinely democratic use of theory, and a use which borders on the terroristic: by trying to articulate the authority structures and institutional contexts within which teaching actually occurs we become more able to discern the difference, and at the same time we engage with the reflexivity which we need in order to elaborate our own feelings about the materials with which our culture confronts us.

By this point in the book, I hope it will have become clear that 'cultural studies' embraces a heterogeneous group of activities; Derek Longhurst's 'Communication studies: definitions and problems' (Ch. 6) isolates one of these emphases, and sets out to provide a statement about its specific value to students. There is here again an engagement with theory and with how we may be able to demonstrate its value – or rather, the value of rendering it articulate, for there is no such thing as a theory-free view of the world. There is also a further version of the complex combination of academic subjects and disciplines, already alluded to by Dunn, which attended the birth, some with blessings and some with imprecations, of communication studies and its cognate disciplines. And there is some attention to 'contemporaneity' in a different sense; we live in a period where the very processes of information are undergoing serious alteration and development, and it is Longhurst's contention that we need to pay attention to these developments - computerization, information technology, electronics - if we are to resist that nostalgic tendency within contemporary cultural studies which serves as our inevitable attempt to 'naturalize' the unfamiliar and the frightening.

The third section of the book could have been much larger; but here, at least, are seven topics within the contemporary culture which should be engaging our attention. Terry Lovell offers us an account of 'Television situation comedy' (Ch. 7) which has ramifications far beyond the specific genre. One of the enduring difficulties of cultural studies has been the problem of dealing with 'popular' forms. All too often, work in contemporary cultural studies has looked like an army of sledgehammers attacking an increasingly shy nut, and a nut, furthermore, with an unexpected resistance to being cracked. By judicious use of theory derived from Freud and Tzvetan Todorov, Lovell raises the question of our own role as 'readers' of cultural texts, and thus turns the analysis of production and consumption into an account of the actual process of reception. She also raises an all-important issue for cultural studies, and indeed for any intellectual discipline: by what means do we pick and sort the actual object of study? By 'author', by genre, by form, by internal structure?

Louis James, in 'Science fiction' and the 'literary' mind' (Ch. 8), works with another popular form and explicitly calls attention to the tangential relation between such forms and the traditional criteria of criticism. High culture, mass culture, popular culture, these are terms

among many which have been used to effect discriminations, but they are also terms, as we need to recognize, which are themselves in a constant process of flux as the relations between classes and subgroups in society alter and re-form. Like Longhurst, James reminds us that massive change is with us even now, change in the technology of information and perception, and that this will inevitably be producing change, perhaps as yet inarticulate, in the imagination. It might be that, in respect of these changes, science fiction, with its insistence on imagining the future in its different possible guises, occupies a privileged position which has little to do with the 'excellence' of the work under discussion; it might also be that we have ourselves to find new forms of 'writing' with which to cope with these changes.

Alec Gordon's essay, 'Thoughts out of season on counter culture' (Ch. 9), is in one sense a detailed account of a specific historical moment, and at the same time an investigation into the process of historical and cultural categorization. It is about 1968, about a certain kind of romantic utopianism, about the New Left (all topics already alluded to); but it is also about how culture is mediated through time, about the stories we make up to account for difficult or intractable material, and in this sense it looks forward to the essays by Richard Johnson and Bernard Sharratt later in the book. Raymond Williams is discussed again, and in a new context, one which offers us some comments about how specific categories of his – the selective tradition, residual, dominant and emergent ideologies - might be usable in a genealogy of cultural viewpoints. And again, there is a polemic here: there is, obviously, a view which would say that effective study presupposes system; but what, Gordon asks, if 'system' itself is an 'effect of history', another one of our ways of subduing that which tends to exceed the bounds of a particular historical world-view?

The structure of Eileen Aird's essay, 'Gender, education and change' (Ch. 10), returns us to the problem of the uses of theory by providing, on the one hand, an empirical account of the problems of education in a gender-divided society and of some of the attempted solutions – or rectifications – of the relations of dominance which obtain at every level of study; and on the other, a way of relating these phenomena to some of Freud's concepts of male and female sexuality, taken in the historical context within which that theory was constructed. And, of course, this is not an 'external' matter: the site which Aird is describing is one where we have all been, and one which has inscribed us all on behalf of the society in whose service education perforce operates. As with many of the other essays, I would hope that this one could be read as a reflexive account of what actually happens to the educators and the educated in a society based on hierarchies of gender, race and class, and in a society, furthermore, which has at the moment sacrificed the political will to modify or ameliorate the effects of those hierarchies.

Within that triplicity of powers, I believe it is fair to say that race is, so far, the least effectively worked in the context of contemporary cultural studies. David Wright's 'Racism in school textbooks' (Ch. 11) embarks on this overwhelmingly difficult subject, at a crucial level. As so often, it is primarily a question of attempting to 'defamiliarize' that which appears familiar and thus unquestionable, in this case geography textbooks which are in wide use and yet are increasingly at best irrelevant to the society in which we live and, at worst, insulting to a vast number of members of that society (and thus to all of us). There is an extent to which what Wright is dealing with is unconscious; and, looking back to previous essays, we may begin to sense that the discernment of conscious and unconscious levels in cultural forms is of primary importance. There is also an implicit argument about power, the power of the written word, especially when sanctioned by specific institutions: nowhere in contemporary culture are we dealing with a pleasing quasi-scientific neutrality, or if we are we are missing the essential connections between culture and the social forces which generate it and hold it in being.

It is power and the written word which, in different ways, are also at stake in 'Textuality/sexuality' (Ch. 12), by Susan Bassnett and Keith Hoskin. The main issue is a general one: how can we see the ways in which every cultural 'text' is structured by issues of sexuality? More specifically, are there particular forms (and Bassnett and Hoskin are concerned with rock music and video) which question established relations? New technology, new languages, new power relations: are we witnessing real change, or further and more adept reticulations of a social formation with unprecedented powers of survival and incorporation? Or, to put it another way, what is the relative autonomy of culture within society? Bassnett and Hoskin return us also to the Falklands War, and now in a more symbolic mode, appropriate in an age where symbolic readings of the text, informed by theorists such as Jacques Derrida and Hélène Cixous, are proliferating.

My essay 'The unconscious and contemporary culture' (Ch. 13), is also informed by such symbolic readings, and addresses itself to ways in which we might get 'under the skin' of various familiar experiences: youth styles, constructions of the future, class attitudes, ways in which the 'literary' is mediated and received. One of the aspects of intellectualism which we are warned against by writers as diverse as Derrida and Michel Foucault is the habit of closure, the supposition that interpretations of phenomena can be arranged into neat and teleological patterns: I have tried to guard against this, and at the same time to take on some of the arguments about narrative which also emerge in the essays by Dunn and Johnson. We live by making narrative: fictions are not superstructural, but function as ways in which we survive the

experiences of incomprehensibility. The short pieces which comprise my essay attempt to be self-reflexive about that construction of narrative.

The first essay in the final section of the book is by Richard Johnson, and is called 'The story so far: and further transformations?' (Ch. 14). It has as its basis a particular practice, that of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, and it has a relation to arguments we have already glimpsed: about the primacy of the political in the structuring of culture, about 'interdisciplinarity', about the role of the New Left, about consciousness and subjectivity. Johnson also addresses the role of Marxism in cultural studies directly, in terms of significant metaphors of circulation and capital. Over the course of the whole volume, I would hope that the debate between 'culturalism' and structuralism has come to have some meaning; Johnson takes this as the site of his argument, and suggests some ways in which precisely this contradiction of approach and methodology might be seen as laying down lines into the future.

John Broadbent, in his 'Site visit: local cultural interpretation' (Ch. 15), can be seen as taking up the argument from the previous two essays, mine and Johnson's, in the sense that he is also resisting the impulse towards the global and the teleological while specifically addressing the question of what immediate analysis of our present predicament, and our real feelings about it, might yield in terms of a set of perceptions of the underlying purposes behind contemporary cultural life. His essay is simultaneously an account of a set of actual pedagogic and experiential practices, a series of workshops run by the Development of University English Teaching Project, at the moment the major attempt in Britain to generate a reading of culture by those within the institutions which are primarily responsible for interpreting it. The prospects of crisis and terminality are perceived in the terms in which we actually experience them in our everyday work: as redundancy, closure of options, professional sterility, collapse of authority. Broadbent's attempt is to validate a version of education as itself a 'form of life' worth living, as against the élitist and power-loaded structures which are privileged increasingly by our political masters. There is also an implicit argument about the nature of psychoanalytic interpretation, and about the consequent importance of myth as a key to understanding the present predicament.

But where, after all, are the crucial myths? Lorna Smith's essay, 'Women beyond culture', (Ch. 16), takes it as axiomatic – as, now, have many other writers – that the major myths can be apprehended only through an attempt to deal in the suppressed but returning forms of the feminine. For us, it may be that such forms can be dealt with only as madness: but again, madness is a culturally constructed category, and it may be only through the extraordinary and uncategorizable experience that we can experience the deficiencies of present culture.

Again, there is a specific modulation here of psychoanalysis, and a specific version of the relations between language and the self, narrated through the reading process itself as it affects the (female) individual: silence, a new relation between bodies and spaces, a new version of the inner significance of alienation, perhaps these are some of the ways through to a new projection of the future; and thus, necessarily, to a new and broader conception of the implications of the present.

The nature of 'spaces' as objects of interpretation is integral to the essays by Johnson and Broadbent; Bernard Sharratt, in his 'Towards the cultural study of time' (Ch. 17), takes up the other essential co-ordinate of our perceptions, in order to demonstrate how this most unquestionable of all elements in our experience is itself socially and culturally constructed. That element of 'construction' is reflected in the 'mosaic' form of the essay; the emphasis on the importance of our imaginings of the future, already present in several of the essays, here becomes focal particularly in relation to Marxist views of what might be available to replace the restrictive and damaging forms of capitalism. Capitalism, we might say, is uniquely the economic form without a future, because it exists only in a fantasy world, a universe which, despite the obvious economic facts, is taken to be continually expanding; this cannot be separated from the restriction of imagination which capitalism must therefore necessarily impose on consciousness, but, as Sharratt points out, this is precisely the difficulty: how to perceive restriction when it has become woven into the very fabric of our culture and our lives.

I am aware of having been writing so far as an editor, as an educator, and as a pluralist. There is a sense – touched on in many of these essays – in which those three orientations are of necessity linked. In the remaining part of this introduction to an introduction, I shall be writing from a different place, from my own convictions about the importance of contemporary cultural studies as a potent force in the constellation of practices and behaviours and conceptualisations which we refer to as culture; and I shall thus also be speaking more subjectively, and from my own experience of what some of the vital conscious and unconscious themes appear to be in the world immediately around us.

All culture is 'political'; that is to say, it has to do with the ways in which people live and with the structures of power which impose themselves on those forms of life. Writing, however, in 1984, the connections between culture and politics are in many respects difficult to see. The British situation is, as always, a peculiar one, and there are many historical factors at work. There is, for instance, the nature of the party political system. Perry Anderson reminded us, years ago, of the absence of a native Marxist sociology in Britain²; he could have added to that the absence of a mass Communist party, an absence which we take as a fact of life but which, in an advanced industrial