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Theory and Method in Cultural Studies

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1 *The Story So Far*

Some time in 1963, then a sociology undergraduate of strongly held opinions but little knowledge, I was moved to hurl Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* across the room and out through my open bedsit window. So absolute was his condemnation of 'Juke-Box boys' and the rest of the burgeoning post-war youth culture that I took his book as a gross calumny visited upon what appeared to me to be the most exciting set of cultural changes since the emergence of the cinema. My anger was made all the more self-righteous by the nostalgia that cloaked his account of the working-class culture of his youth (I fancied myself a hard-headed Leninist at the time, and had little truck with such romanticism) and his evident belief in the superiority of that older culture over the new. By a nice irony I could just about see from my window the area of Leeds of which he had written, and as I sheepishly rescued the book from the dirty puddle into which it had fallen, the sight of those rows of decaying back-to-backs should have been more than enough to teach me a lesson about the perils of youthful arrogance and the many forms that understanding can take.

Needless to say it did no such thing, and I returned to my reading of Hoggart in a mood of determined dissent combined with sociological evangelism. I had no way of knowing then, of course, that in terms of previous critical discussions Hoggart's book was actually a significant move in my direction, for all its antagonism to the popular culture that so fascinated me. Nor did I suspect that both the author and his book would play a vital role in initiating the field of 'cultural studies' and that much of my subsequent academic life would be caught up in the ramifications of that innovation. Had I known, I would probably have been horrified at the thought of such inter-disciplinary miscegenation, let alone at the prospect of playing any part in it. These were crusading years in British sociology, and mine and my contemporaries' commitment to our embattled discipline was deeply felt.

By the time I graduated I was rather less puritan in my beliefs, and when I first met Hoggart in 1965 – he gave me a peripatetic job interview which began, somewhat unusually, with an appointment outside the main entrance of a well known Leeds department store – I was no longer of a mind to cast him or his ideas out of the window. As far as I recall (and this is not reliable since the 'interview' involved a pint or two of Tetley's mild) I never even confessed to my earlier indiscretions with his book. Nor, however, did I go to work at the newly created Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies of which Hoggart was the founding Director. Had I done so, perhaps my relationship to the next 30 years of cultural studies history would have been quite different. Certainly I would have experienced it much more from within, compared to the rather sceptical and somewhat distanced position that I have maintained over the subsequent decades.

I tell this story less in a nostalgic frame of mind than with the aim of giving my reader some sense of the background from which this book emerges – where I am coming from, to borrow an ugly but apposite phrase. Indeed, shorn of its youthful exuberance, my ballistic response to *The Uses of Literacy* could stand as a microcosm of my attitude to cultural studies more generally. An uneasy and ambiguous combination of fascination with its subject matter, impatience with at least some aspects of its more 'literary critical' inheritance, fury with its tendency toward exclusivism and theoretical fashion, admiration for its inter-disciplinary inventiveness, and sympathy with its politically critical project. For over 30 years I have watched the monster grow, largely as an interested observer, though sometimes – especially where my first love, the cinema, was concerned – as a more active participant. It has been an eventful history. I have seen the rise and fall of several marxisms, battles fought for possession of the true structuralist spirit, disciplinary boundaries crumble then rebuild themselves, psychoanalytic concepts of unparalleled obscurity spread far and wide, active readers emerge to be celebrated, and passive victims of media manipulation laid to uneasy rest.

Throughout this time I have been puzzled. Where did it all come from, this intense commitment to remaking the map of culture, and why did it take the form that it did? How was it that scholars trained in disciplines normally consumed by mutual disrespect, not to mention hatred, came to co-operate across the newly encountered terrain? What intellectual earthquake gave rise to the extraordinary fascination with theory (or perhaps it should be 'Theory') that pervaded academic pursuits not previously distinguished by their engagement with systematic abstraction? Along what road had we travelled such that an abiding desire to discriminate between high and low, good and bad culture, was transmuted into a body of thought directed at analytic understanding but with no particular reference to the aesthetic or moral value of specific artefacts? In short, what is cultural studies, where did it come from, and what are its logics?

What cultural studies is not

In some part, this book is my answer to these questions. It is not a complete answer, nor could it be. I make no claim to be defining 'cultural studies' here or to be defending some such paradigmatic practice. What I shall try to do is lay out the kinds of arguments that formed what Chaney (1994: 9) wisely prefers to call 'the *field* of cultural studies' in full recognition that there is much more to which the label attaches than I shall consider here. In so doing I shall be examining many of the individual works and schools of thought that feature in the standard textbooks of the area (for example Turner, 1990, or Storey, 1993). However, it is important to stress that I am not seeking to provide an alternative to those excellent introductory texts. My aim here is to present an analytic history of cultural studies that focuses primarily upon the field's theoretical and methodological dynamics. My exposition, therefore, is not designed with a view to the completeness of coverage that a textbook would require; instead I select the analytic issues that I consider to be the most significant. In general terms I shall return constantly to issues of epistemology and ontology. What kind of knowledge claims are made by different cultural studies practices and on what grounds are they warranted? What kinds of assumptions do they make about the nature of culture and social life and what are their implications? And perhaps most generally of all, what conceptions do they hold concerning the ubiquitous tension between the structuring capacity of cultural forms and the activity of human agency?

My aim, then, is analytic, not descriptive. Indeed, even to try to describe everything to which the term cultural studies has been applied would keep us here from now until Doomsday, and later still. Over 20 years ago Colin Sparks (1996a: 14) opened a discussion of cultural studies' evolution by observing how difficult it was to offer any kind of precise definition: '[a] veritable rag-bag of ideas, methods and concerns from literary criticism, sociology, history, media studies, etc., are lumped together under the convenient label of cultural studies'. As many later commentators have, he resolved his definitional problem by attending primarily to the work of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, a move which is convenient but which has become increasingly misleading as the years have gone by. Sparks is guiltless in this respect; he recognizes that the CCCS' work represents 'a very limited part' of the larger and more complex enterprise. Later authors – not least those who have sought to carry the word of British cultural studies across the Atlantic – have been less scrupulous however, and contemporary students looking to such sources for enlightenment could be forgiven for thinking that the CCCS and 'cultural studies' were more or less conterminous.

That is at one end of the scale. At the other end, the question of definition is dealt with not by restriction but by unfettered inflation. This was always likely, of course, given the range of disciplinary environments on which early cultural studies drew. But even some of the more precise attempts to formulate the parameters of the enterprise have found themselves rapidly ascending the ladder of generality. Richard Johnson's (1986: 45) much quoted 'What is Cultural Studies Anyway?' at one point sees the cultural studies project as being 'to abstract, describe and reconstitute in concrete studies the social forms through which human beings "live", become conscious, sustain themselves subjectively'. Some might claim that to be a decent enough definition of sociology rather than cultural studies, though not Johnson, who writes as a historian and a marxist, and it certainly proclaims a very large field of study. Again, as time has gone by, less rather than more care has been exercised, with the 1990s bringing a vast increase in work labelled 'cultural studies' but sharing little more than that label itself. The seemingly exponential growth of textbooks and edited collections is clearly feeding a hunger for the subject, whatever it might be, but it is also bringing with it a diffuseness which does nothing to improve our sense of what the project is all about.

Of course, I recognize that I too am contributing to this expansion by writing this book. In mitigation I shall immediately concede that I am not seeking to define cultural studies, or limit it to some set of practices that I think are right and proper. I shall use the term rather as people in everyday life use genre categories such as romantic fiction or horror: that is, to invoke a tradition which is presumed to exhibit significant shared features and which would be recognized as such by a culturally competent observer. This does not exclude boundary disputes since, like genres and other disciplines, cultural studies is necessarily blurred at its edges. Indeed, cultural studies is especially so in that it is itself comprised of inputs from a whole range of disciplinary environments that pre-existed it. One of its principal distinguishing characteristics is precisely that it drew together conceptual material which began life in other disciplinary domains but which was transmuted in the transfer from one context to another. Linguistics, literary criticism, media research, sociology, philosophy, history, film studies, and others, are all part of the genetic mix of cultural studies. It is hardly surprising, then, that we should find centrifugal inclinations in such a trans-disciplinary 'discipline'. As Frow (1995: 7) observes, 'cultural studies exists in a state of productive uncertainty about its status as a discipline'.

Since the task of disciplinary definition is fruitless in any form that escapes vacuity, I shall instead try to examine the main analytic positions that have been historically recognized as prominent in the formation of the field. By constructing an analytic history I shall be able to examine the arguments linking various elements in the cultural studies mix, so identifying the key concepts that have moulded analysis and the key problems that have surfaced repeatedly. Inevitably that results in serious omissions, particularly in the recent period when cultural studies has spiralled out into a whole range of new applications. For instance, I shall not discuss the emergence of 'post-colonial' cultural studies, or the significant recent considerations of race and 'otherness' in culture. This is not because I consider these issues unimportant. It is because, for all their undoubted importance, they are not addressed to the central analytic problems of the cultural studies tradition. Even those issues associated with the so-called 'postmodern turn' (the decline of 'grand narratives', relativism, fluid subjectivity, and the like) will only interest me here in as much as they can be seen to have emerged, not from the force of postmodernity itself, but as a consequence of the internal logics of the tradition. Postmodern cultural form is an interesting topic for cultural studies research, but its ideas are less than interesting as a conceptual resource for cultural studies theory. This judgement might have to alter, of course, although views on that will vary according to the degree to which recent cultural change is seen as a recognisable extension of late modernity or a more radical dislocation. On that question the jury is still out, and, while I know my own position, it would be premature here to speculate upon the likely verdict.

Once upon a time

What, then, is the broad shape of this 'history' that I shall examine? In the much simplified narrative that will occupy the rest of this chapter – and structure the rest of the book – I shall view it as a series of phases, the move from one to the next occasioned by perceived failings of each and consequent attempts to reconstruct the tradition in such a way as to overcome those failings. Note that this does not necessarily imply an overall progression. The fact that at each transition specifiable difficulties are addressed does not mean that they are actually resolved. Nor does this dynamic produce a linear process of intellectual evolution, however much it may look like that in the schematic narrative that I shall provide. As the more detailed discussion of later chapters illustrates, the road-map of cultural studies is not without its byways, diversions and motorway interchanges.

I do believe, however, that there is a key 'moment' in the emergence of cultural studies without which this history would be so markedly different as to constitute quite another intellectual enterprise. This moment reflects the extraordinary impact of structuralism on the nascent field of study. While it is conventional to single out the early contributions of the likes of Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams as constitutive of the cultural studies project – and I too will consider them in that light in Chapter 2 – the real turning point comes later. In the latter part of the 1960s many disciplines were affected (and affronted) by a body of ideas and analytic methods imported from France. Ultimately rooted in Saussure's structural linguistics, these seemingly arcane ideas were to alter for ever the direction and character of cultural studies. It was structuralism that offered a flag under which an otherwise motley collection of inter-disciplinary mercenaries could unite, however precariously. And it was through the terms of structuralist theories that, at least for a time, diverse inputs could be synthesized into a larger endeavour. There is a real sense in which cultural studies is a child – a bastard child, perhaps – of structuralism.

But I get ahead of myself. To appreciate the magnitude of the impact of structuralism it is first necessary to consider the kinds of views of culture and cultural analysis that preceded its intervention. Aspiring cultural analysts of my generation were faced with a firmly entrenched view of culture. At its foundation was the idea of critical discrimination and the assumption that it was essential to distinguish between high and low culture. On this account, the twentieth century had seen the spread of new and largely undesirable forms of mass culture – cultural artefacts produced in industrial style for the diversion and entertainment of the urban masses. The goal of literary and cultural criticism was to ensure the preservation of quality in the face of this challenge, and to analyse culture, therefore, was to make such informed judgements. Even in sociology, where the question of cultural value was less to the fore, it was widely assumed that mass culture was inferior and required little in the way of sophisticated analysis for its proper understanding. Media research was thus dominated by a concern with the (adverse) effects of popular cultural forms and by the then widely discussed concept of 'mass society'.

For those engaged in higher education in the late 1950s and the first half of the 1960s this established view of culture became increasingly unacceptable, in part because of its insistent elitism, but also because it precluded a coherent and appropriately sensitive analysis of popular culture. The widespread assumption that 'mass culture' was intrinsically crude meant that little or no attention was paid to the everyday culture of most of the population, whether the historic class-based traditions (like that described by Hoggart) or the newly emergent youth cultures of the period. In literary criticism, in educational studies, in the sociology of the media, there was growing dissatisfaction with the inability of the prevailing view of culture to say anything interesting about the new and vibrant popular cultural forms. All that was available was simple condemnation and a somewhat patronizing desire to equip the young with the ability to discriminate.

It was in this context that what might be called 'popular cultural studies' emerged, initially without a clear programme other than to afford to popular culture the attention that it was presumed to merit. This move was driven by some of the same considerations that had formed the terms of traditional cultural analysis, at least in as much as it evinced a desire to demonstrate the aesthetic and moral quality of the likes of Hollywood cinema or popular music. But, influenced also by less art-centred views of culture and by those, like Williams, who argued that culture should be understood as deeply embedded in the lives of ordinary people, there was also pressure to examine cultural artefacts and their users in a more holistic and systematic way. It was in this project that the first tentative steps toward cross-disciplinary fertilization were seen, and it was here also that there was growing awareness of the need for a new framework and method of analysis. By the later years of the 1960s this search was beginning to focus on the concept of 'language'. Processes of communication, whether in art, film, television or fiction, were clearly language-like in some sense. Perhaps it would be around the concept of language that a new unity of approach could be forged.

So it proved, for it was only when attention turned to the theories of language and culture developed in French structuralism that diffuse resistance to traditional modes of analysis found a positive theoretical focus. As we shall see in Chapter 2, the break with tradition heralded by Hoggart, Williams and the new analysts of popular culture was incomplete. It needed the structuralist input to shift discussion onto a radically different terrain – that of signification. At this point the story becomes much more complicated and I shall have to skate over details that will be given lengthier consideration later. Minimally it is necessary to distinguish two successive phases of structuralist influence, the first of which revolved around the attempt to apply Saussurian ideas to all kinds of processes of signification, while the second sought to relocate the resulting over-formal analysis of cultural texts into its historical, social and psychoanalytic context. Provided not too much weight is attached to the terms themselves, these two phases can usefully be thought of as 'structuralist' and 'post-structuralist' cultural studies.

In the structuralist phase the informing ideas are those found in a series of famous Saussurian concepts. I shall not examine those ideas here; they are given a full discussion in Chapter 3. Their import was to focus attention on the systems of 'language' that enabled communication in diverse cultural forms. If people communicated, the reasoning ran, then that was a consequence of a shared set of codes and conventions upon which they drew. So, whatever the cultural form on which analysis focused – film, television, fiction, photography, or any other communicative mode – the structuralist goal was to uncover the underlying system upon which communication depended. Saussure had envisaged a science of signs to which he had given the name 'semiology'. In this first phase of structuralist cultural studies that semiological ideal loomed large, even if in actuality it was rarely, if ever, achieved.

In analytic practice, as seen in the work of Lévi-Strauss, early Barthes, and a host of enthusiastic borrowers of their ideas, this gave rise to complex analyses of 'texts' of all shapes and sizes. At last cultural analysis had found a new method, and one, furthermore, that transcended disciplinary restrictions in the name of a 'scientific' decoding of the workings of culture. It was also a method that encouraged a dominantly formal approach to the texts under analysis, one in which the operation of the signs that made up a text was all too easily rendered as an emergent product of the significatory system alone. Although the original Saussurian theory viewed language very much in its social context, the first phase of its application to cultural studies rather neglected this social potential in favour of using his concepts in formal textual analysis. Quite quickly, however, exponents of the new method became aware of the problems arising from this formalism, and by the beginning of the 1970s it was clear that 'structuralism' alone was insufficient. Although it had provided a method of analysis appropriate for a cultural studies with ambitions to examine a wide range of forms of culture, that analysis was now in need of theoretical and empirical integration into a larger account of the contexts of communication.

The search for that larger account is reflected here, as it was elsewhere, in the move from 'structuralism' to 'post-structuralism', and it was to generate the basic theoretical terms in which the nascent discipline would come into its own. It is at this point in my narrative that we reach a major parting of the ways in cultural studies. One form of post-structuralism – that associated with the journal *Screen* and referred to here as '*Screen* theory' – would embrace an essentially psychoanalytic approach to the constitution of subjectivity, while a second – developed mainly in the work of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies – would lean on Gramscian theories of hegemony in their analysis of the social and historical role of cultural forms. Both positions saw ideology as a key concept and both laid claim to historical materialism as an informing perspective. But the modes of analysis to which their different post-structuralisms gave rise would develop into two contrasting approaches to cultural studies.

In *Screen* theory (the main focus of Chapter 4) the key ideas were derived from Althusser's theory of ideology and focused upon the capacity of texts and discourses to position 'readers' as particular subjects. By being constituted as a certain kind of subject by cultural materials, an individual was caught within ideology. Accordingly, texts were to be analysed with a view to uncovering these processes of 'interpellation': the ways in which our sense of ourselves as distinctive subjects was constructed through and by the systems of discourse that made up our culture. How best to theorize such processes of subject constitution? For *Screen* theory it became foundational to assume that psychoanalytic concepts would provide privileged access to these processes, notably through terms drawn from the 'structuralist' development of psychoanalytic theory pioneered by Jacques Lacan. Thus, by yoking together a theory of ideology that focused upon the construction of subjects, and a psychoanalytic account of that process itself, *Screen* theory was able, formally at least, to locate structural analysis in a social and psychoanalytic context. From these beginnings there developed the whole tradition of 'subject positioning theory' which, to this day, retains an important role in cultural analysis.

The crucial period for the development of *Screen* theory was during the first half of the 1970s, and by the middle of that decade it had reached its high point of influence. It was very controversial, with critics accusing the theory of over-determinism, of psychoanalytic reductionism, and of betraying *Screen*'s political project by retreating into the obscurantism of Lacanian terminology. Among these critics were members of the *Screen* group itself, as well as those within the CCCS who had made it their business to engage with this particular extension of structuralism. The CCCS had also been much influenced by the first phase of structuralist thinking and, while rejecting *Screen*'s formulation of post-structuralism, was eager to find its own way of carrying things forward. Convinced that ideology was the key concept through which to relate structural analysis of texts to larger political and social dynamics, they too drew upon Althusser. However, rather than extending Althusser's ideas in the ways found in *Screen* theory, they sought increasingly to theorize ideology in terms derived from Gramsci's work.

We will examine this version of post-structuralist cultural studies in some detail in Chapter 5. For the purposes of the present outline it is only necessary to note that the CCCS position, while preserving a central emphasis on ideology, rejected the strongly text-driven model that *Screen* had derived from Althusser and Lacan. For the CCCS, culture was a site of constant conflict, a significatory terrain across which attempts to secure hegemony – in effect, domination by consent of the dominated – were variously resisted. Class remained a key concept. Although it was increasingly recognized that gender and race were important structuring features of social life, in its main period of influence the CCCS was committed to class-based analysis first and foremost. That was in the late 1970s and early 1980s, at which time both the Centre and its then Director, Stuart Hall, produced a remarkable body of work. Hall in particular pushed cultural studies theory forward; and the series of papers that he published during this period are probably the most influential cultural studies writing to come from the pen of a single individual.

In spite of the quality of that work, however, it became apparent in the course of the Thatcherite 1980s that something was amiss with this neo-Gramscian synthesis. Doubts had been growing in the social sciences and humanities about the effectiveness of class-based general theories, and it was also becoming clear that the polysemic potential of culture – its inherent capacity for multiple meanings and ambiguity – was significantly greater than even the CCCS model could encompass. Saussurian structuralism had always recognized that semiotic systems were complex and under-determined, by their very nature open to plural 'readings' – although language systems did indeed set limits on communication processes, they were rarely simple or straightforward enough to do so unambiguously. However, in embedding structuralism in a context that viewed culture as ideology, as a key element in securing hegemony, the CCCS framework was obliged to minimize these polysemic aspects of communication. How else could the dominant ideology be effective? Accordingly, CCCS thinking sought to understand the relationship between cultural texts and readers as one in which the basic reference point was a hegemonic 'preferred reading'. While this 'preferred reading' could in principle be resisted or negotiated, the tendency was to see culture and communication as largely text-and-ideology dominated. Thus, both of the main post-structuralist bodies of cultural studies theory had, in their different ways, emphasized the power of texts over readers. Yet it was rapidly becoming clear that readers were much more active contributors to the reading process than could be countenanced in these models. How was this limitation to be overcome?

It was in response to such doubts that the 1980s saw a reformulation of the relationship between text and reader. One important contribution to this analytic shift came from feminism, which had been playing an increasingly significant role in all areas of cultural studies. In *Screen* theory, for example, the use of psychoanalytic concepts to theorize the subject had been further developed in feminist terms by Laura Mulvey in an influential and much-reprinted paper first published in 1975. I shall discuss hers and other feminist arguments in some detail in Chapter 6. Here it is only necessary to note that it was the debate precipitated by Mulvey's analysis, initially revolving around questions of gendered spectatorship, that served to open up the whole issue of active spectatorship in the subject-positioning model. Meanwhile, other forms of feminist cultural studies were focusing upon women's ability to appropriate texts and to use them in ways not necessarily consistent with the ideology that they allegedly conveyed. In examining forms of 'women's culture' such as soap opera and romantic fiction, feminists exposed the tension between their textual attributes as expressions of patriarchal ideology and the creative use that readers made of them in search of pleasure.

Even without these feminist interventions, however, the rise of the reader seems retrospectively inevitable in the ferment of 1980s cultural studies. Earlier ideology based models were in serious