

Cultural Studies

Research Methodologies in European Cultures and Societies

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Cultural Studies: a brief genealogy

- Late 1960s:
- Students' movements on the lead: contestation of the established scientific traditions and institutional practices
- The crisis reaches *literary studies* (exhaustion of structuralist paradigms – a scientific method and a self-enclosed object? Self-reflexivity? – always precarious central concepts – the literary escapes fixed categories, despite powerful notions such as the canon or the supposed radical singularity of literature)
- Impact of mass culture and new media on literature
- The Humanities and Social Sciences redefine their disciplinary identities and their position in the wider context of knowledge production
- - openness, decentering, opening up of borders

Cultural Studies: a brief genealogy

- An acute awareness of the relevance of the Humanities in the social field
- New dialogues between disciplines, awareness of the complexity of objects of study – and a common interest emerges:

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CULTURE

the concept evolves as an INTERDISCURSIVE SPACE, a complex category that could bring together and make fruitful the dialogue between Humanities and Social Sciences, generating interdisciplinary research methodologies

CULTURE

- The definition of culture, so diverse for different disciplines, seemed the ideal ground to *test* cultural studies as a research method
- In turn, what became cultural studies as a wide debate amidst disciplines mirrors the complexity and polissemym of the object of study also - CULTURE

THE BIRMINGHAM CENTER FOR CONTEMPORARYCULTURAL STUDIES (1964 -2002)

- A product of post-war Britain
- Adult education / gains for the working class
- CLASS takes centerstage – ***the working class culture – popular culture and the impact of mass culture*** (music, the radio, mass fiction, film, television...)
- Debates about ‘value’ and the nature of the ‘popular’ (emperils the notion of critique)
- Critique of the canon
- Strong influence of cultural materialism and the Frankfurt School, marxism (Gramsci; Althusser; Barthes; the New Left)

Cultural Studies

- → An innovative intellectual approach, based on three elements: a more or less historical and philosophical one; a second, proximity to sociology, and a third, and most important, the critical-literary element. (Richard Hoggart, 1970)

→ Collaborative work & cooperation among disciplines

Richard Hoggart (Literary Studies)

Raymond Williams (Lit. Studies)

E. P. Thompson (History)

Stuart Hall (Sociology)

Angela McRobbie (Cultural
Theory)

Paul Willis (Lit. Studies)

Dick Hebdige (Media Theory
Sociology)

Major influences:

Literary studies

A hermeneutical approach in line with the textualization of objects: issues of language: polissemics, ambiguity, ideology, resistance

- 'close reading' as analytical technique: dismantling narratives and meanings
- The aesthetic dimension of the object recovers its historical dimension: historicization is a must (the text is both a product of and an active participant in history)

History:

- Emphasis on socio-cultural CONTEXTUALIZATION (Ref.: New Historicism - Stephen Greenblatt, Louis Montrose, Michel Foucault, ...)
- The aesthetic is acknowledged as material as well: the literary text is a historical document; texts circulate among other texts, in power networks, and gain power via that circulation.
- Critique, too, must be contextualized.

Raymond Williams

What is culture? – a new concept of culture

- Culture designates “a whole way of life”
- Culture “is ordinary” (vis-a-vis high culture)
- Culture is simultaneously generic and specific, collective and individual, material (Anthropology) and symbolic (History & Literary Studies): ***culture is a collective network of meanings that guides individual action and is in turn constantly modified by individual action***

The Birmingham School view on culture

- Culture as a way of life vs. cultural elitism
 - Culture as a political phenomenon: an arena of power – a stage of struggles over meaning and the signification process
 - → **meaning is a space of political struggle**
 - The critic assumes their standpoint/positionality – the place of enunciation is explicit (**self-reflexivity**)
 - Culture is a complex, plural and palimpsestic study object
 - **Interdisciplinarity as method – must be dialogical and integrative**
- a TRANSDISCIPLINE?**
- **Goal: deconstruction and critical analysis of the processes involved in the production of meaning and the power relations they imply.**

MEANING

Catherine Belsey considers some questions concerning the relations between human beings and language, readers and texts, writing and cultural politics, such as:

- Who makes meaning? The object itself? Or does the reader/observer make meaning while engaging with the object/text?
- If meaning stays with the subject, how do their personal values influence it? Their social identities? The context itself?
- And how much influence can the text itself retain?

REPRESENTATION

“The main point is that meaning does not inhere *in* things, in the world. It is constructed, produced. It is the result of a **signifying practice** – a practice that produces meaning, that *makes things mean*” (Hall 1997, 24).

Two main systems for the apprehension of the world:

the **senses** (e.g. looking) and **language**



In the connection between word and the concept lies **MEANING**. The process which connects the three elements is **REPRESENTATION**.

REPRESENTATION

“Culture is not so much a set of things – novels or paintings or TV programmes and comics – as a process, a set of practices [anthropological understanding]. Primarily, culture is concerned with the **production and exchange of meanings** – ‘the giving and taking of meaning’ – between the members of a society and a group.”

(Hall, Stuart ed. *Representation. Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*.)

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Culture is essentially a dynamic **SOCIAL PROCESS**

Meaning making relates to **POWER**

- Who represents WHAT? By which MEANS? Providing which READING DIRECTIONS? According to which INTERESTS?
 - Who is represented?
 - Who speaks? Who doesn't speak?

POWER includes and excludes

POWER & AGENCY

- Inequality lies at the basis of social relations
- Culture, as the way one thinks or acts and how those forms of knowledge become projected or embodied in artifacts, thus, becomes a vehicle of representations and of power.
- **POWER** *a la* M. Foucault:
 - is not static, but circulates, and may 'change hands' – power is everywhere (the microphysics of power)
 - can result from negotiation (and acceptance) , not always imposed or aggressive (big power)
 - it is essentially productive: creates discourses, institutions, objects, identities, positions
 - this malleability of power allows for **NEGOTIATION**, **RESISTANCE** as **COUNTERPOWER - AGENCY**

- Methods - Textualization of objects and 'close- reading'

- NARRATIVIZATION is a method often used in CS to *read an* object:
 - = the articulation between aspects of the cultural phenomenon allows for establishing relations and creating a narrative
 - (history – discourse – voice / narrator / perspective – character – time – space – means – genre – conventions)
- Close reading, as a technique also of textual analysis, allows for critical deconstruction and can be applied to different objects of material culture
- Contextualization: as a social construction, the object is inserted in a debate where it gains political pertinence

- Methods - Textualization of objects and 'close- reading'

- Roland Barthes:
 - from a DENOTATIVE (general) reading (*STUDIUM*)
to a CONOTATIVE (detailed) reading (*PUNCTUM*):
 - |
 - > the detail 'pricks' the observer/reader:
 - "A photograph's punctum is that accident
which **pricks** me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)"
 - |
 - (relates to the interference of subjectivity, creativity, memory)
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 - The DECONSTRUCTION of the image leads to a critical commentary
that is attentive to DETAIL
 - E. g. a visual 'close reading' technique combines:
 - the perception of the image as a social construction
(context/intention/reception)
 - with deconstruction and interpretation
(ideology/creativity)

Studies in material culture and the 'participative turn':

E.g. VISUAL STUDIES:

Seeing should be understood as the point of intersection between what we know, what we perceive and what we feel, using all of our senses. In opposition to the traditional visual perspective which was based on one sense, seeing is a collective way of seeing, visualizing and imagining. (Mirzoeff, 2017)

Focal point: how do the social processes of the image and the look (production, circulation and reception/consumption) guide the meanings we attribute to them?

- images are socially produced
- images are forms of REPRESENTATION
- ways of seeing are also socially produced
- The modes and conventions, as the circuits, also define the object

From anti-discipline/method to institutionalized form of knowdge
– a discipline?

The difficulty in articulating THEORY – POLITICS - PRACTICE

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Critiques:

- Diversity of study object and methodology → dispersion, lack of rigueur – creates a déficit in academic respectability and legitimacy
- Institucionalization discourages change (tames activism and criticism)
- Its emphasis on the 'popular' entails dangers of connection to populism
- Relativization of the notion of value
- Critique makes the field less accessible

Photography

Mirzoeff identifies diverse 'fluxes of visibility' in the *circulation of* images associated to the Black Lives Matter movement:

- **testimony**
 - **protest materials**
 - **sharing** (from social media to the dominant media)
- 'Citizen journalism', 'semiotic activism', 'artivism' – all describe ways of dealing with visual culture that aim at intervening in reality – visual studies as a **tactic (a counter-visibility)**



John Jay Kim / *Chicago Tribune*
(Lamon Reccord's persistent look; Chicago BLM protests, 2015)

Nicholas Mirzoeff, *Critical Inquiry*
https://criticalinquiry.uchicago.edu/tactics_of_appearance/

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* See also: Bennett, Tony et al eds. *New Keywords. A Revised Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. Blackwell, 2012, 63-69.