

# INTERNATIONAL MEDIA RESEARCH

A critical survey

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# CULTURAL STUDIES AS A RESEARCH PERSPECTIVE: THEMES AND TENSIONS

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How is it possible to understand soap operas as cultural practices without studying the broadcasting institutions that produce and distribute them, and in part create the audiences?

(Garnham, 1995: 71)

Cultural studies did not reject political economy *per se*, discussions of capitalism have always figured centrally in its work; rather it rejected the way certain political economists practice political economy.

(Grossberg, 1995: 72)

The cultural studies literature plays much with the word 'power'. The problem is that the source of this power remains, in general, opaque. And this vagueness about power and the structures and practices of domination allows a similar vagueness about resistance. . . . Can we not admit that there are extremely constrained and impoverished cultural practices that contribute nothing to social change?

(Garnham, 1995: 69)

Cultural studies believes that culture matters and that it cannot be simply treated (or dismissed) as the transparent, at least to the critic, public face of dominative and manipulative capitalists. Cultural studies emphasizes the complexity and contradictions, not only within culture, but in the relations between people, culture, and power.

(Grossberg, 1995: 76)

Critical political economy is at its strongest in explaining who gets to speak to whom and what forms these symbolic encounters take in the major spaces of public culture. But cultural studies, at its best, has much of value to say about . . . how discourse and imagery are organized in complex and shifting patterns of meaning and how these meanings are reproduced, negotiated, and struggled over in the flow and flux of everyday life.

(Murdock, 1995: 94)

These short excerpts from a recent polemical exchange about Cultural Studies demonstrate that work defined under this heading is still highly controversial. The quotations cited above reflect on the tensions between the perspectives of Cultural Studies and of Political Economy, with each side tending to depict the other as an

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inadequate framework for the analysis of culture and the media. Other debates around Cultural Studies are aligned differently, as we shall see below. Cultural Studies is currently the subject of contending claims which are often also of significance for media studies more generally. For even if the definitive attributes of Cultural Studies as a distinctive field refuse to be fixed, culture as an analytic theme and as a perspective on the media (and social life generally) continues to grow in prominence. And while there are a number of differing approaches to culture within the human sciences, today it requires a significant feat of evasion to take a cultural perspective on the media without in some way coming to terms with the literature of Cultural Studies and its existence as an established, and rapidly growing, academic project.

Cultural Studies is notoriously heterogeneous. Its diversity makes any attempt to offer a synoptic account of it precarious. However, this caveat does not alter my argument in this chapter, which is that there is an intellectual vitality, a set of concerns, and an array of theoretical and empirical orientations within Cultural Studies from which media research greatly benefits.

I shall argue as a media researcher who identifies considerably with the Cultural Studies project, who has been inspired by it, but can also see some of its limitations. While much of the work of Cultural Studies in its formative years dealt with the media, today media enquiry is only a relatively small part of its interests. However, what Cultural Studies at its best has to offer has less to do with specific topic areas and more to do with the kinds of perspective that it has developed, its modes of theorizing and its methodological innovations.

I begin with some reflections on the radical heterogeneity of media research quite independent of its linkage with Cultural Studies. Then I offer a snapshot account of the evolution of the latter, before turning to a discussion of what I take to be its core theoretical elements. These cluster around three themes: culture, meaning and power. I follow that discussion with some reflections on critical theory and postmodernism and then address major dilemmas and tensions, concluding with some brief pointers about what Cultural Studies might offer media research in the future.

### THE MULTIPLICITY OF MEDIA RESEARCH

For media research, the focus of analysis is an array of topics which can be grouped according to the classic steps of the communication chain: 'senders' and the circumstances of production, forms and contents of the output, and the processes and impact of reception/consumption. However, such categorization becomes increasingly awkward at a time when the media are becoming so pervasive and so integrated – both institutionally and experientially – with the social world. It becomes quite difficult within late modern society to distinguish, for example, lived, everyday cultures from ubiquitous and highly intertextual media cultures. Institutionally, the media are becoming ever more entwined in global, corporate configurations. Media research has tried to capture these developments and to

emphasize the interfacing of media structures and processes within changing contexts. Thus, for example, we have had 'waves' of research linking media with a new international information order, with the political economy of media technology, with the fall and rise of social formations, with the transformations of political cultures and the emergence of social movements, with the micro-settings of everyday life, and with young people's use of popular media in shaping their identities.

The intellectual horizons informing contemporary media research are also diverse. Here, strands of enquiry deriving from the established social scientific traditions of sociology, psychology, social psychology, and political science (which can still manifest versions of positivist thinking) are to be found alongside the more interpretive currents inspired by anthropology, literature and film studies. There is now a whole alignment of post-positivist trajectories, including critical theory, hermeneutics, feminism, and poststructuralism. Any effort to try to impose a unity on media research, to transform it from a loose field into a 'discipline', is thus flawed.

### CULTURAL STUDIES, A SPRAWLING EVOLUTION

With these points about the diverse character of media research in mind, I want to note some key moments in the evolution of Cultural Studies and briefly to identify some of its main concerns. The aim here is largely descriptive, to convey a sense of the increasingly wide range of topics with which Cultural Studies engages (see, for example, Brantlinger, 1990; Turner, 1990; Hall, 1992; McGuigan, 1992; Harris, 1992; Grossberg, 1993).

The conventional beginning is Britain in the late 1950s, when the New Left emerged as a political grouping. This political element is crucial and not merely circumstantial. As Hall (1992) recounts, the New Left was involved in a strenuous dialogue with Marxism, rejecting the dogmatism of the British Communist Party and the Soviet Union, yet trying to extract a viable analytic framework from the Marxian tradition in order to understand and to confront contemporary economy and society. The origins of Cultural Studies are therefore to be found primarily in the attempt to develop a critical political practice. Most histories of Cultural Studies also mention in particular three key authors and their landmark works: Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* (1957), Raymond Williams's *Culture and Society* (1958), and E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963). All, in very different ways, contributed to the conceptualizing of culture as a feature of the lived practices of everyday life, which needed to be understood in political terms. I will return to this point below.

The formation of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in 1963 at the University of Birmingham, first under Hoggart, then with Stuart Hall as the leading figure, constitutes another decisive stage. The decade of the 1970s at the Centre is often seen as a sort of 'golden age' of Cultural Studies, where much groundbreaking work was done. There are accounts of the various theoretical conflicts

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which were generated while wrestling with different versions of Marxian theory (in particular Althusser's and Gramsci's). The efforts to develop a Marxist theory of ideology based in class analysis, were interrupted, first by feminism (see Franklin *et al.*, 1991) and then by questions of race (e.g. Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies 1982). Other theoretical influences were incorporated, chief among them a linguistic turn which continued to foster semiotic approaches to meaning. The broad range of work undertaken in the Centre during the period is usefully summarized in Hall *et al.* (1980). For a recent collection of texts centring on Hall's contribution to Cultural Studies and its encounters with Marxism, postmodernism, race and other topics, see Morley and Chen (1996).

Much of the theoretical development in the early years proceeded by encounters with media structures and processes: Hall's classic article on 'Encoding/decoding' (in Hall *et al.*, 1980) is a case in point. Cultural theory was brought in from anthropology, especially via Lévi-Strauss, and ethnographic methods were utilized in several projects, among them two well known books by Willis (1977) and Hebdige (1979). Both not only made use of Gramscian hegemony theory, but also thematized the notion of everyday resistance. Together with other texts they are evidence of the weight given to the theme of subcultures. Morley's (1980) study of the sense-making processes around current affairs television also made use of ethnographic methods. This book not only was of more direct pertinence for media research, it also signalled the major ethnographic turn to qualitative audience research which rose to prominence in the 1980s (see also Morley, 1992). The processes of reception, the contextually situated production of meaning by media audiences, was now seen as an empirical social question which could not be answered by merely specifying the ideological dimensions of media output through the use of a critical semiotics.

During the 1980s, Cultural Studies became not only increasingly theoretically diverse, but also increasingly institutionalized. While the centre at Birmingham was subject to financial cutbacks and some staff left for other positions in Britain and beyond, Cultural Studies as an academic field was beginning to establish itself. New courses were launched, notably the innovative one on popular culture at the Open University (see Miller, 1994), which greatly helped to spread the work of the Centre. (Several important texts with a media focus derived from this course, for example Bennett *et al.*, 1986). In Britain, Cultural Studies continued to draw from and to influence literary studies (see Easthope, 1991), as well as cinema studies, resulting in new and productive approaches to film and television (see MacCabe, 1986).

But Cultural Studies was also beginning to move overseas, particularly to Australia (cf. Fiske *et al.*, 1987; Frow and Morris, 1993), Canada (cf. Blundell *et al.*, 1993) and the United States, losing its uniquely British profile (Schwarz, 1994). Especially in the United States, Cultural Studies began to get a firm foothold within the university sector (for a British Cultural Studies encounter with America, see Clarke, 1991). This development was not without problems, to which I will return. The theoretical eclecticism continued to grow, within an increasingly

geographically dispersed Cultural Studies. By now the theme of popular pleasure was finding a more central place (see Harris, 1992), as much new writing focused on various aspects of popular culture, for instance TV soap operas (Ang, 1985; Hobson, 1982), romance novels (Radway, 1984), and feminist analysis of popular media (Modleski, 1984).

In the United States, Cultural Studies was taken up partly by media researchers, but also by people working in literature departments. Cultural Studies here not surprisingly shed much of its Marxist legacy, and instead became the ground on which many approaches could meet: concern with feminism, race and ethnicity, and with postmodernity in its various guises, made their way into its 'core'. The Cultural Studies of the 1990s shows the prevalence of discourse analysis and poststructuralism; it also displays a strong focus on identity politics, post-colonialism, globalization, multiculturalism and national identity – the latter theme more evident in Europe, Canada and Australia than in the United States. The journal *Cultural Studies* was launched in the latter part of the 1980s. Though now based in America (initially, it was edited from Australia), in its pages one finds ample evidence of Cultural Studies' transnational character; for example, the May, 1994 issue was devoted to Nordic research. In 1990 a major conference was held at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, which resulted in a collection of forty papers (Grossberg *et al.*, 1992). From its financially modest but intellectually ambitious origins in Birmingham in the 1960s and 1970s, Cultural Studies had arrived as an established academic field. This is apparent from the large number of textbooks and anthologies aimed at the student market (e.g. Barker and Beezer, 1992; During, 1993; Gray and McGuigan, 1993; Inglis, 1993).

From this brief overview, I want now to go back and look in more detail at some central theoretical strands.

### **THEORETICAL LANDSCAPES: CULTURE, MEANING, POWER**

Cultural Studies' core concern is with culture as a key concept for understanding features of our contemporary historical situation. In recent decades there has also been a deep-rooted concern with culture outside of Cultural Studies, a culturalogical 'turn' in social theory more generally, upon which Cultural Studies has drawn (cf. Chaney, 1994; Alexander and Siedman, 1990; *The Polity Reader*, 1994). I cannot, of course, retrace all the debates that were generated around the concept of culture, but I do want to highlight a number of interrelated core themes.

The first has to do with culture as an aesthetic versus a sociological–anthropological issue. Certainly within the traditions of literary and artistic humanism, culture – often with an implied capital C – has been seen as something produced by artists and writers, to be analysed aesthetically. From the standpoint of Cultural Studies, it was particularly the work of Raymond Williams which helped extract culture from the literary–aesthetic ghetto and make it a concern for social analysis as well as significantly broadening the range of things which could

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be regarded as 'cultural'. Williams and the tradition of British cultural materialism which he represents (see Milner, 1993, for a discussion of the role of cultural materialism in the development of Cultural Studies) took the important step of treating culture as a part of lived experience in society, and not just as a body of texts or as art. This does not mean that the aesthetic dimension became irrelevant. On the contrary, Cultural Studies has paid considerable attention to aesthetic questions, for instance, in respect of popular music, styles of dress, television programmes and film. But the point is that these analyses are placed in socio-historical contexts in such a manner that aesthetics becomes a tool for illuminating aspects of the social.

Cultural Studies also increasingly came to challenge the traditional distinction between high, or elite culture, and low, or popular culture. The challenge did not consist in simply dismissing any differences between these categories, but rather in arguing that the distinctions could not be understood purely in aesthetic terms. What is deemed high or low culture is always in part a question of power relations within society. Incorporating the work of sociologists of culture, chiefly Bourdieu (1984), Cultural Studies could argue that taste is never merely a question of individual preference, but is socially located in complex hierarchies and the identifications they mobilize. Cultural Studies does not follow the line of argument about 'mass culture' developed by the Frankfurt School, which saw popular culture as inexorably tied to the commodification of consciousness under capitalism. Likewise, Cultural Studies rejected the American-derived idea of mass culture as an expression of cultural democracy. Popular culture came to be taken seriously for its potentially conservative, ideological dimensions, but also for its meanings, pleasures and practices. The very notion of popular culture raises the issue of the popular and 'the people', long a central topic of debate within Marxism and Cultural Studies (for a succinct survey of the debates around the concept of popular culture, see Storey, 1993).

The above two themes come together in the opposition between idealist and materialist understandings of culture. This polarity poses the question of whether culture should be seen as separate from, and by implication superior to, the world of the social, or as derived from and helping constitute the social. In support of the latter view, there is an array of positions within social theory (including Marxism), various strands of anthropology, and sociologies of culture. The Marxism of Gramsci, with its emphasis on practice, social consciousness and everyday life, became a central point of reference. By contrast, the sociologies of Durkheim, which makes use of an idealist conception of collective consciousness, or that of Parsons, which sees culture basically as an integrating, stabilizing system, have found no place in Cultural Studies.

Cultural Studies' materialism takes a constructivist and dialectical perspective on culture, that is to say its premise is that people and social institutions in specific historical circumstances produce culture, which in turn helps to produce and reproduce society. In this perspective, culture also consists of the circulation of values, and, more generally, meaning. A major step in the advance of cultural

theory within Cultural Studies was the incorporation of elements of semiotics during the 1970s. The names of Roland Barthes, and, to a lesser extent, Umberto Eco, both of whom build upon the work of de Saussure, figure prominently here. One could argue that what began to emerge was a communications perspective on culture, a perspective particularly applicable to the study of the mass media, though it was also utilized in the study of communication within other social settings.

In its initial phase, this semiotic turn had a quasi-objectivist character. The semiotic conceptual toolbox, including signs, signifiers, signifieds, codes, and conventions, was mobilized to illuminate specific processes of sociocultural signification. This approach to semiotics emphasized the structural quality of signification: the meaning actually communicated could be elucidated by examining semiotic structures. These semiotic structures were linked to social structures, and therefore to the realm of power and ideology. But it can be noted here that this structuralist rendering of culture and meaning, greatly influenced by the appropriation of Althusser's Marxism, was visibly in tension with more 'culturalist' readings, as Hall (1980) noted in a seminal article. The culturalist orientation, especially associated with Williams and E.P. Thompson, emphasized agency and experience. In other words, culture and meaning are in part constituted by people's subjectivities and cannot simply be equated with, and read off from, cultural texts. Debates on these issues became very intricate, but it is fair to say that the theoretical polarity between structure and agency remains crucial, not only within Cultural Studies and theories of signification, but also within Marxist theory and sociological approaches to the social order more generally.

This brings me to the key theme within Cultural Studies' concept of culture, namely that culture is a bearer of social power. This is not to say that Cultural Studies merely reduces culture to power, nor does it reduce meaning to ideology, but rather that it sharply refutes the dominant theoretical traditions which have kept culture immune from questions of power. Culture, as a materialist category, embodied in social institutions and practices, shapes subjectivity and social relations. Social relations are 'always already' the embodiment of power relations. Originally Cultural Studies emphasized class antagonisms, but, as mentioned above, feminism raised questions about patriarchy and social order. Race and ethnicity were also increasingly highlighted: one of the Centre's landmark works in the 1970s (Hall *et al.*, 1978) was a study of how the media portrayal of mugging in Britain, as a crime wave basically perpetrated by blacks, played into the hands of state power.

The theme of power within Cultural Studies was largely cast in terms of Gramsci's much-cited notion of hegemony, which was an attempt to conceptualize how the powerful in society elicit support and consent from subordinate groups. With this move, Cultural Studies could link together a materialist understanding of culture and signification with a non-determinist view of power and ideology: ideology is not merely given, an essentialist feature of late capitalist life, but rather an accomplishment, an achievement which has to be continuously re-made

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because it is contestable. Neo-Gramscian hegemony theory thus keeps the door open for the possibility of resistance to ideology. If ideology is seen as consisting of processes of meaning that support social relations of domination, those meanings can potentially always be challenged and redefined. As a theoretical orientation, this emphasis on challenge and resistance focuses precisely on the interconnections between human agency and socioeconomic structure. Culture, particularly popular culture, can be treated as a plane of ideological struggle.

Yet as the quotations at the start of this chapter suggest, Cultural Studies continues to have a polemical relationship with political economic conceptions of power. From the perspective of political economy, the 'objective' circumstances of social existence have more explanatory power than the 'subjective' factors of ideology. While this is an issue for Cultural Studies, it is also a question of which version of political economy is being put forward. Few accounts would opt for a fully deterministic and reductionist brand, seeing culture as a mere epiphenomenon of the 'genuine reality' formed by economic dynamics. At the same time, few cultural theorists would deny that the logic of capital and its institutional manifestations contribute to shaping social power. It is between these extremes that many positions have been articulated, with differing conceptions of how much independence can be accorded to cultural phenomena in explaining the reproduction of, and levels of resistance to, dominant power.

For example, is social class to be seen as the fundamental variable of domination, shaping social location, subjectivity and identity, or is it merely one of several factors to be weighed, along with gender, ethnicity and other categories? My own judgement is that while class is a central and indispensable category, there can be no fixed gauge as to its relative weight in all situations; context and articulation become paramount. The political economy of class must be set in relation to other concrete forms of domination in specific instances; in some cases it will have more bearing, in others, less. Certainly the feminist movement and the struggles of oppressed people of colour have demonstrated that gender and racial subordination are not merely a function of social class. At the same time, class can intertwine with these other forms of domination. There are few practitioners of Cultural Studies or Political Economy who argue that there is an irresolvable incompatibility between these different forms of categorization and attributed relations. Most will acknowledge the possibility of complementarity. In practice, however, research has not often demonstrated this.

A good deal of Cultural Studies' research during the 1980s centred upon the notion of resistance. This was conceptually expanded beyond the work of the Centre by a number of authors (e.g. Fiske, 1989) and put into theoretical frameworks which downplayed the role of social structure and power. The argument was that if meaning is fundamentally polysemic and can thus never be fully stabilized, and, further, if meaning is socially negotiated, then media audiences have much greater interpretive freedom than traditional critiques of ideology give them credit for. The image of the powerful media gave way to an image of powerful audiences, who could make sense of media output in virtually

unlimited ways. Structure, many commentators pointed out, had all but been replaced by agency.

This view gained momentum, with 'resistance' to hegemony being seen as enacted by 'active' audiences who interpreted media, especially popular entertainment, in alternative and oppositional ways. Even the gaining of pleasure from media artefacts was in some cases heralded, in and of itself, as evidence of resistance. The excesses of this particular Cultural Studies wave eventually evoked critical responses, both from within Cultural Studies (cf. Morris, 1990) and from the wider field of media research. Curran (1990), for example, saw it as part of a 'new revisionism', conceptually situated close to the traditional liberal views emphasizing individual choice in a setting devoid of structural domination.

### JUXTAPOSITIONS: POSTMODERNISM, POLITICAL ECONOMY AND CRITICAL THEORY

Cultural Studies is close to the centre of that movement towards greater self-reflection prevalent in academic life today. Within Cultural Studies we find the various claims and debates of feminism, psychoanalysis and, not least, postmodernism. This open-ended and agonistic dimension is an important feature of Cultural Studies, and has led to some important modifications in its view of what culture is. Thus, within the original, Raymond Williams-inspired, notion of culture was the idea that it pointed to 'the whole way of life' of a society. This totalizing perspective was of course already called into question by the study of subcultures. Moreover, with the increasing influence of the poststructural and postmodern theory produced by a number of largely French theorists (Foucault, Derrida, the later Barthes, Baudrillard and Lyotard), the tendency to think in terms of the unity of culture began to give more and more ground to the theme of heterology. Culture was conceived increasingly as a myriad of partially overlapping systems of value and meaning in a society; while national cultures could not be dismissed, attention to the details of the cultures of specific groups grew. 'Difference' became a pervasive concept.

It is important to emphasize that changes in the view of culture are embedded in a shift in theory which exceeds even the wide parameters of Cultural Studies. I referred above to poststructural views of signification, in which meaning is seen as radically contingent. These views became an important building block of the postmodern perspective. Subjectivity, too, came to be cast in terms of contingency and multiplicity: particularly through the influence of Lacanian psychoanalysis: the human subject is seen as decentred, fragmented, never fully at one with itself, but always in the process of struggling for wholeness, desiring that which it lacks. Perhaps most fundamentally, knowledge itself, as understood in the Enlightenment tradition, is increasingly problematized. The claims of knowledge and science to rest on firm foundations have been confronted; universalist representations of knowledge have not only been historicized or treated as contingent to social circumstances, but also seen as ultimately inseparable from power. While

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such ideas have evolved over the course of the past century, the critical and relativist view of knowledge was given a strong push in the 1970s and 1980s through the works of 'neo-Nietzschean' writers such as Foucault and Lyotard. Again, these developments signal not a collapse of the possibilities of knowledge according to the Enlightenment, but rather a deep modification of our understanding of its limits.

For Cultural Studies, the incorporation of postmodern thought had major consequences. Research began to thematize the heterogeneity of culture. Hebdige's (1988) essays marked an important step in Cultural Studies' use of postmodern thought while retaining a critical perspective. Further, the theoretical portrait of the dispersed, nomadic subject helped make identity work and identity politics a focus of its concern. This was linked with feminist analyses of gendered identity, specifying how specific groups learn to become male or female and what these distinctions mean in different contexts. Baudrillard's work on simulation and simulacra (for instance, Baudrillard, 1983) helped foster a strand within Cultural Studies which underscored the collapse of the distinctions between 'the real world' and the cultural forms which express, stage, and enact it. Many currents within postmodern thought, with its radical questioning of representation, were readily applicable to the media (see, for instance, Mellencamp's (1990) collection on television).

And it is especially here, at the border crossing between postmodernism and the critical tradition, where significant theoretical developments have occurred. The principal issues can be formulated thus: given the massive dose of relativism which postmodernism injects into our understanding of knowledge, of representation, and of the self, on what grounds can one speak of domination and subjugation? On the basis of what intellectual foundation can one specify something else as ideological? How does one formulate an emancipatory vision in the wake of heterology? Such questions emerge not only within Cultural Studies, but also within critical, or Western Marxism, which has had increasing difficulties since the 1970s in offering a full and compelling account of the sociohistorical world. Singled out by postmodernism as one of the main 'grand narratives' of the Enlightenment legacy, the theoretically totalizing tendencies of Marxism, with their anchoring in class analysis, have fallen on bad times in an increasingly fragmented social world.

However, it is my contention that both within and beyond Cultural Studies, postmodernism offers opportunities for reconstruction of the critical tradition. This tradition, through Kant, Hegel and Marx, all the way to the Frankfurt School, psychoanalysis and feminism – has emphasized the critique of domination and of unnecessary constraints on human freedom. It is very much a child of the Enlightenment. The encounter with postmodernism, far from acting as an obstacle or a diversion, can help further to develop and enhance the liberatory project, adapting it to newer social conditions (see Pieterse, 1992). It is to Cultural Studies' credit that it has provided space for this theoretical encounter.

## AXES OF TENSION

As should be evident from this brief and selective overview, Cultural Studies embodies both conceptual and institutional dilemmas. In this section, I will briefly call attention to some major difficulties, organizing the presentation around four sets of polarities – all closely related and criss-crossing at several points.

The first tension concerns the issue of a fluid versus fixed identity for Cultural Studies, which is continuously poised between the need to define its turf and a desire to keep its boundaries permeable. Obviously any field or discipline must be somewhat fluid if it is not to atrophy. It must evolve across time. But what are the definitive elements? In the case of Cultural Studies, the answer remains somewhat in doubt. Certainly there are implicit boundaries; for example, the journal *Cultural Studies* includes specific kinds of article but not others. Yet, when a field gets as heterogeneous as Cultural Studies, the very label becomes too elastic.

A second tension concerns the principles of selection by which Cultural Studies has drawn on other traditions of enquiry. Cultural Studies is paradoxically both broad, drawing upon many different intellectual currents, yet narrow in the sense that it tends systematically to isolate itself from certain kinds of analytic approach altogether. With its emphasis on culture, meaning, subjectivity, etc., it generally avoids using and testing itself against such strands as macro-sociology (population profiles, systematic accounts of social stratification, migration, etc.), the sociology of culture-producing institutions and the political economy of cultural industries. This is unfortunate since interconnections would be mutually beneficial. (See Golding and Murdock, 1991, for such a discussion from the perspective of political economy.)

Thirdly, there is the continuing issue of Cultural Studies as a political versus academic enterprise. It is not impossible to do politically relevant work in academic settings, but one must acknowledge the real hindrances involved. As it becomes entrenched in the university, Cultural Studies becomes subject to all the institutional pressures of academic life: the need for standardized syllabuses and textbooks, the financial imperative to attract students, the gamesmanship of getting research grants, career strategies for obtaining and holding academic jobs. The 'market strategy' of Cultural Studies at the university often seems to result in a tendency to equate the popular with youth culture, leading to a constricted sociological horizon, not to mention a displacement of political perspectives. The larger critical perspectives on the social order tend to be replaced by celebratory accounts of the popular. There are, of course, genuine efforts to maintain a political focus in the research, and to treat teaching reflexively as a critical practice (see Giroux, 1994). Cultural Studies' self-proclaimed political identity is nevertheless difficult to maintain in an academic setting. The social situation of critical or leftist academics and intellectuals *vis-à-vis* the majority of the population, especially oppressed groups, has often been ambiguous. There is an understandable sensitivity to the social hierarchy involved; Left academics want to avoid elitism. With

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regard to the mass media and popular culture, this expresses itself in a reluctance to take a critical position on questions of value. No doubt fuelled by the relativism of the postmodern wave, we have witnessed a rise of what McGuigan (1992) terms 'cultural populism', where academics, not wanting to disparage the experiences of ordinary people, may celebrate popular culture as an expression of solidarity. (For a vehement rebuttal of this trend, see Berman, 1991; the issue is also addressed in Modleski, 1986). The perspective of the Frankfurt School on popular culture has come to represent for some people in Cultural Studies the paradigmatic elitist and 'politically incorrect' attitude to take. Significantly, many people now working in Cultural Studies are personally involved in the pleasures of popular culture; an involvement which Adorno and Horkheimer most emphatically did not share. Acknowledging or even experiencing the pleasures while at the same time keeping political horizons in view can be difficult.

A fourth tension lies in the relationship between textual and socio-institutional analysis, and is closely related to that between the humanities and the social sciences within Cultural Studies. For a variety of reasons, including the fact that texts are easier to work with, both in the classroom and as research objects, and also because many scholars in Cultural Studies come from the humanities and have backgrounds in literature and film, Cultural Studies is coloured by humanities-inspired textual research. There is a social scientific strand within it, largely represented by ethnographic and other forms of qualitative research but certain modes of social science tend to be selectively avoided. Thus, Cultural Studies tends to produce a skewed body of knowledge, quite often ignoring the macro-institutional settings in which cultural texts are produced, circulated and experienced.

Like the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, the political thrust of Cultural Studies includes, at the theoretical level, a transdisciplinary response, a dialogical and critical encounter with its contemporary disciplinary 'others'. For critical theory, this was chiefly mainstream sociology and psychology, as well as orthodox Marxism. For Cultural Studies, it is a whole range of disciplines in the humanities and social sciences. Both critical theory and Cultural Studies are historically situated. Both begin to lose their efficacy as critical interventions when subjected to extensive systematization and codification. Yet, at the same time, those committed to the critical project must understand the conditions and limits of critique as a form of knowledge, even in its most efficacious renderings.

Critique as such is but one moment or phase of the knowledge process; the critical project more generally also needs 'positive knowledge', a key theme in Habermas's attempts to reconstruct historical materialism and ground the human sciences. The larger emancipatory and reconstructive visions and their projects also need useful knowledge on which to base decisions and practices. The questions are of course, what kind of knowledge this is, for whom, and for what purpose? The answers are always contingent. Yet such positive knowledge must be formulated in ways that make it relevant for the critical enterprise (for a concise

programmatic statement on critical media research from a Cultural Studies perspective, see Hall, 1989).

As the previous sections of this article have indicated, there are tensions within the diverse menu of the Cultural Studies tradition, as well as some notable absences on the terrain which it has defined for itself. It cannot simply be incorporated as a self-defined domain within the pluralistic landscape of media research. Indeed, many of the traditional perspectives and issues within media research will continue to be compelling, without their giving any thought to Cultural Studies. The very heterogeneity of the field speaks strongly for this.

But as the media become all the more central to the organization and experience of social life, as our everyday culture increasingly becomes a media culture, media research will continue to find the strands of work in Cultural Studies a valuable source of ideas. Along with shifts in the scale and cultural reach of the media will also go shifts in their nature. The indications are that they will become less obviously and directly 'mass' and more specialized, personalized and interactive, decreasingly phenomena for which one is only an audience. As a widely varying range of resources for cultural practice, they will be important constituents of cultural change, of new forms of cultural stratification and perhaps of a reconfiguration of cultural power.

Throughout this chapter I have claimed that Cultural Studies' efforts to explore and develop ideas about meaning, the theoretical import it gives to subjectivity and, most fundamentally, the primacy it accords to the power dimensions of culture, constitute an achievement with increasing relevance to contemporary social analysis. This, despite the problems and the evasions which are documentable too. I would speculate that while the basic contours which dominate in media research today will continue to do so for a number of years to come, we will see an increase in activity on the 'margins'. In these margins, we will find different strands of interpretative and critical work being generated, with Cultural Studies playing a pivotal role in their formation and development and in mediating their relationship with core concerns and perspectives. With the development of work on a distinctive methodology for researching culture, for giving cultural analysis a stronger and more comprehensive empirical dimension (see Alasuutari, 1995), the interconnections possible at this level should become more extensive and productive too.

Finally, I have stressed the importance of Cultural Studies' openness to intellectual developments in philosophy and social theory. The current turbulence within the philosophy of knowledge and science is something which, far from avoiding, it has fully engaged with. This is important for the long-term development of media research: like classic critical social theory, Cultural Studies continues to confront scientific self-delusion. It is not impossible that we might do media research which is theoretically and methodologically sound, socially useful, politically provocative and yet which is constantly aware of its provisionality and limits. Indeed, the field of research as a whole should not place lesser demands on itself.

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## PRIMARY SOURCES

The literature of Cultural Studies is immense, especially if one includes texts from cultural theory, postmodernism, feminism, multiculturalism, and other related areas. I wish to highlight here a few key texts on the media which will be helpful to those not familiar with work in the area.

The collection by Stuart Hall *et al.* (1980) not only provides a summary overview of the kind of empirical work carried out at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham during the 1970s, but also gives a sense of the range of theoretical work which early British Cultural Studies drew on.

During the 1980s, a number of books appeared which were to become 'classics'. There are five that I would mention here, in alphabetical order. Ien Ang's (1985) study on how viewers experience the TV programme *Dallas* was based on letters written by viewers rather than ethnographic observation but it opened up a number of important themes in reception studies and issues of meaning production. Dick Hebdige (1988) makes use of the critical essay – a prevalent form within Cultural Studies – to address a wide range of topics within popular culture, mobilizing important themes from postmodern thought. Tanya Modleski (1984) analyses popular women's fiction and TV soap operas to develop a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between women's fantasies and popular culture. Janice Radway (1984) interviewed readers of popular women's fiction, and in a work often noted for both its methodological and theoretical innovation, illuminated the meanings such literature can have within the context of the women's everyday life circumstances. Finally, while David Morley's first major ethnographic study (1980) has earned a place in the history of both media research and Cultural Studies. His collection of articles (1992) not only summarizes his early efforts and presents important later work, but also offers discussions of the methodological issues and debates that occurred in the 1980s over ethnographic audience studies.

Two interpretive histories of Cultural Studies are found in Brantlinger (1990) and Turner (1990). While Turner follows more closely the unfolding of Cultural Studies, the former is more intellectually ambitious. Brantlinger engages in extensive conceptual exposition and situates the development of the area, in both the United States as well as Britain, within contemporary thought. James Carey (1989) has long espoused the idea of Cultural Studies and his post-positivistic approaches to media research represent an important American strand of work.

Popular music is a subfield of Cultural Studies as well as of media research and is often linked to analysis of youth culture. Simon Frith is a key figure here, and of his many publications, *Sound Effects* (1981–3) is particularly notable. Frith is exemplary in his attempt to combine political economic and cultural enquiry. The more recent collection on music video by Frith *et al.* (1993) is an excellent source. Closer to home, I can also mention that in Sweden in recent years there has been enormous activity in the area of youth culture, focusing on style, music, entertainment and modernity. The English-language collection by Johan Fornäs and Göran Bolin (1994) provides an overview of this work.

As I mentioned early in this chapter, there are a number of anthologies which offer overviews of Cultural Studies, and these can be very helpful sources. The ones by Simon During (1993) and Ann Gray and Jim McGuigan (1993) are careful selections including both theoretical and empirical case studies. The large collection by Lawrence Grossberg *et al.* (1992) reflects the diversity that often arises from conference-based anthologies, yet at the same time it can be seen as a report on the current pluralization of Cultural Studies. The recent collection by Morley and Chen (1996) is particularly useful in that it traces Stuart Hall's intellectual and political development in several areas, illuminating important steps in the development of the whole field. This anthology includes several pieces by, and interviews with, Hall.

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