

Renewing Cultural Studies

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Volume 3 | Issue 6 | Dec. 2000 |

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- Renew is an awkward word. Its prefix seems to make its idea of something 'new' impossible. And everyday experience further underlines the contradiction. My first memory of using the word 'renew' was related to the anxiety of library overdue books: renewing those books was a pragmatic way to avoid the impending fines.
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- This is a useful starting point for pondering any cultural moment of renewal. Renew describes the impetus towards change while acknowledging the past's weighted effect on producing any transformation. It articulates a challenged continuity rather than a break or discontinuity with a particular past. Where I would like to take this idea of renewal is into the realm of cultural studies and its continuing intellectual project through two efforts or essays.

Essay 1: Recombinant Culture

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- There are no doubt many ways to characterise the value of cultural studies. What I want to emphasise here is how cultural studies worked to transform the basic conceptualisation of culture itself. These are familiar paths but to identify some of the principal intellectual traits for rethinking and fundamentally renewing the definition of culture:
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1.

the contested terrain of the popular; the hegemonic restructuring of culture through winning and building of consent as a moving and transforming force; and
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the concentration on the making of the "other" and the "other's" process of piecing together cultural sense

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Essay 2: Refocussing on Cultural Production

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- One of the successes of cultural studies is its well-developed reading of the practices of reception. The active audience approach has led to understanding how audiences use and contextualise cultural forms. Specifically studies in television, popular music and, to a lesser degree, film have

benefitted from this rereading of popular culture and audiences.

11 Clearly underdeveloped in cultural studies is an analysis of production. Yet the massive work on the active audience approach is fundamentally a study of cultural production, albeit in the terminology of reception. What is embedded in the active audience reading of cultural forms is the audience's will to produce the text. This reproduction of the text by the audience not only transforms the text, but also points to the very desire (by cultural studies' research itself in the same way that the researcher's reading of a subculture's political and cultural will was refracted through sartorial style and a cultural politics of street appropriation) for the will to produce in the audience.

12 There is a moment in our recombinant culture that certain technologies have intensified the will to produce, if not production itself. The Internet and the World Wide Web have provided cultural studies a clear shift towards a production ethos that has altered the formal boundaries of what constitutes production. The user of the Internet actively plays the role of producer and audience, not just in terms of a heightened pattern of interactivity but in the regularity and routineness with which Websites appear as part of the general system of cultural production. Because all Websites are distributed and disseminated in one system or network the delineations that used to give television networks their nearly exclusive voice and image of authority are not as easily made via the Internet. This moment of production flux and the cultural politics it has generated is already contested as large media corporations work to differentiate content and "quality" so that websites are hierarchised into different registers of cultural value.

13 What I am arguing for here is a renewal of study that now looks at a different starting point in the cycles of production and consumption for cultural studies. Production in this recombinant culture always implies a process of reception and recontextualisation of the past meanings into current objectives and directions. Cultural studies needs to investigate this current blending of production and consumption more vigorously. For instance, how does [Napster](#) shift the play of the production outwards into a myriad of possible recombining producer/consumers who make their music available for others? How is the large music publisher [Bertelsmann](#) engaging in a process of capitalising in some way on this process of dissemination through their negotiations with Napster? We are seeing enacted in this one case the changing landscape of cultural production and cultural consumption where the product, the property and the service are no longer clearly defined in either industrially or culturally agreed-upon standards.

14 New media culture in general is operating on different criteria of cultural production and cultural consumption: products seem to be continually in process and in that process include their consumers into the process of production. This is clearly evident in the development of computer games as they include their core "audience" in transforming and improving their "product". The digitalisation of cultural forms has permitted the development of "soft-products": that is, products that can be changed and recombined and are therefore not so easily end-products but as entities are continually in process.

15 Because cultural studies has such a well-developed understanding of the process of the transformation of meaning through its study of active reception, it is particularly valuable in interpreting how this recombinant culture is operating in and through new technologies. In a sense, cultural studies can be deployed in making sense of this transformed cultural economy. Through a shift in focus from consumption to production (but fundamentally working with the same insights about cultural meaning, activity and production), the intellectual project of cultural studies can successfully renew itself.

Citation reference for this article

MLA style:

P. David Marshall. "Renewing Cultural Studies." M/C: A Journal of Media and Culture 3.6 (2000). [your date of access] <<http://www.api-network.com/mc/0012/studies.php>>.

Chicago style:

P. David Marshall, "Renewing Cultural Studies," M/C: A Journal of Media and Culture 3, no. 6 (2000), <<http://www.api-network.com/mc/0012/studies.php>> ([your date of access]).

APA style:

P. David Marshall. (2000) Renewing Cultural Studies. M/C: A Journal of Media and Culture 3(6). <<http://www.api-network.com/mc/0012/studies.php>> ([your date of access]).