

# Cultural Studies

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Contemporary cultural studies and folklore share allied goals, sensibilities and approaches, particularly on the broad level of their common concern with culture as a whole way of life. In general, many scholars in both cultural studies and folklore focus on social negotiations that occur at cultural boundaries, especially local adaptations to the encroachments of other cultural regimes. Likewise, the concern in performance-oriented folklore research with the dynamic relationship between expressive forms and context resonates with various foci of cultural studies. Folklorists and cultural studies researchers share an interest in how creative forms indicate something about the larger social and political dynamics in which they occur.

“Cultural studies” describes heterogeneous interdisciplinary research with few defining features other than an interest in the critical analysis of cultural formations in their particular contexts. In general use, the term does not delimit any particular subject matters or methods, or even a well-defined body of work. Instead, it signifies an orientation in research. Cultural studies tends to be concerned with the study of culture as “everyday life,” and of the social construction of cultural formations as a dynamic process that is socially, politically, and historically context-specific. Cultural studies works typically combine semiotic modes of analysis with ideological critique as they examine structures of power, domination, and resistance. The topics of study within the rubric of cultural studies are diverse, ranging from broad-based phenomenon, like the construction of working class identity, to specific artifacts, like films or tourist attractions. Likewise, the field cannot be narrowly defined with reference to theories or methods, but many cultural studies works draw on Marxist, feminist, post-structuralist, psychoanalytic or sociological theories. Particularly in the American context, “cultural studies” has come to be largely synonymous with the study of contemporary culture, especially of contemporary *popular* culture or mass media.<sup>1</sup>

Increasingly, cultural studies may be located in part in its institutionalization in the academic landscape. While “cultural studies” remains a term of convenience in general use, it has become the proper name of a division of global academic publishing and a number of programs

in universities and colleges. Moreover, it has infiltrated undergraduate education: cultural studies has been integrated into composition courses as a model of reading and analysis, included in introductory classes in a range of established disciplines, and offered as topics courses in their own right. Cultural studies research takes place under the umbrella of numerous disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, though many researchers in the field are affiliated with literature and history departments. Likewise, while some conferences and journals, like *Cultural Studies*, are devoted explicitly to disseminating cultural studies research, cultural studies work finds outlets in a wide range of more general journals and conferences (see Sarah Zupko's Cultural Studies Center for some current listings).

### Characteristics of Cultural Studies

Given the range of work that may be labeled "cultural studies," any generalizations about the field may over-emphasize its coherence or commonalities. However, the following points may be taken as typical of the mainstream of current cultural studies research.

Some of the key presuppositions of cultural studies emerge in its notion of culture itself. "Culture" is not the domain of an elite, but rather the whole realm of human activity. It is not monolithic, but rather heterogeneous and emergent. Cultural studies is concerned with the active processes of how cultural formations develop in particular settings, and with their social and political effects. Cultural studies approaches culture as a dynamic system, in which all forms of human activity are embedded in and shape social and material conditions.

Cultural studies draws on methods of textual analysis to explicate cultural formations. However, it borrows an expanded notion of text from semiotics: a "text" in this sense is anything that is symbolically organized and intelligible. Thus, "cultural formations" include not only verbal, visual, musical, material, and customary artifacts, but also the social practices and relations they are embedded in. Indeed, the object of study of cultural studies is rarely an isolated artifact, but rather the interrelationships of forms and practices. Semiotics and discourse analysis provide a basis for analyzing the meaningful components or signifying practices that constitute cultural formations.

Semiotic analysis goes hand in hand in cultural studies with Marxist or materialist critique. Cultural studies generally presupposes that all cultural formations are embedded in symbolic and material structures of power, and that symbolic structures have real effects. Researchers tend to pay attention to the politics of how cultural formations are produced and circulated or repressed. At issue is how power structures are formed and negotiated, how

particular cultural formations function in the context of existing relations of power, and often, the liberation of the repressed. Cultural studies is often described as an engaged form of analysis that considers the political implications of cultural formations and challenges social inequality.

Much work in cultural studies tends to depart from Marxist/materialist critiques that presuppose the determining role of structures of power; it may emphasize instead individual or local agency in resistance to domination. While some scholars go further than others in emphasizing the importance of individual subjectivity—studying culture in relation to individual lives—the mainstream of cultural studies tends to insist on the specificity of a given subject, and the importance of context in the study of those specific cultural formations. Claims are rarely made for “culture” as a whole, but rather focus on particular subjects in well-bounded historical, geographic, and social settings.

Finally, cultural studies is now noted for its tendency to take these presuppositions to the logical conclusion of self-reflexive analysis and critique. Many cultural studies works engage the problem that any critical analysis is itself ideological, an embedded manifestation of social and material practices and structures of power that produces meaning while claiming to uncover meaning. While issues of knowledge production have come to be a touchstone of much recent cultural studies analysis, cultural studies writings have long emphasized personal, autobiographical, evaluative, and political commitments and deferred claims to standards of objectivity or “science.”

### **Development of Cultural Studies**

Just as there is no one “cultural studies,” the development of cultural studies may not be reduced to a single coherent narrative. Theorists of cultural studies sometimes distinguish between British, French and American traditions of cultural studies. However, while particular strands of cultural studies research have held sway in particular times and places, our catch-all “cultural studies” consists of all three, and has been shaped by cross-fertilization. The following rough chronology aims only at identifying significant moments in the development of cultural studies taken as a whole.

Though the term did not emerge until the 1960s, the first work that has been generally identified as “cultural studies” is that of Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams in Great Britain in the 1950s. As the British education system expanded substantially through the 1950s and 1960s, it continued to promulgate the notion that the “great tradition”—a greatly restricted literary canon—was the means of forming an educated, mature citizenry and defending it against the debased pleasures of “mass culture.” Hoggart’s *The*

*Uses of Literacy* (1957) and Williams's *Culture and Society: 1780–1950* (1958) challenged this notion in part by criticizing the separation of “high culture” from “culture as a whole way of life,” and the taking of one practice, like reading, out of the context of a network of other “life-practices,” like work and family life. While sharing the anxiety about the threat of mass culture, both championed, to some degree, a British working class, communal culture that was marginalized or erased by the “great tradition.”

Some of the cultural studies that followed challenged the definition of the “great tradition” without significantly revising its terms. Thus, Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel's *The Popular Arts* (1964) argued for an elevation of the status of jazz and film while continuing to devalue television and rock music. In Germany, Theodore Adorno and the Frankfurt School also theorized “high” and “low” culture in developing Marxist critical theory, sometimes with reference to popular culture, through the 1950s. While later cultural studies theorizing rejects “high culture” / “low culture” schemas, and particularly the implication that mass culture has a contaminating influence, early cultural studies scholarship, including E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1968), established a lasting foundation for the cultural studies that followed in noting the intimate connection between social status and politics. Several of these early cultural studies works, including many supported by the University of Birmingham's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, founded by Richard Hoggart in 1964, also introduced the continuing practice of bringing autobiographical or ethnographic approaches to cultural studies.

A “hard structuralist” approach to cultural studies emerged in the 1970s, drawing on the work of Louis Althusser and Jacques Lacan. Though Althusser drew on Marxist theory and Lacan developed psychoanalytic theory, both presented theories of the individual as a construct of ideology. Individuals internalize dominant social values as they identify with the images provided for them by the dominant ideology, which has already transformed categories that are particular and partial into categories that seem “natural” and eternal. These perspectives have been particularly taken up in film studies, especially with reference to gender (see, for instance, Laura Mulvey's “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” 1975) and issues of capital in cultural production (see Barbara Klinger, “Digressions at the Cinema: Reception and Mass Culture” 1989). The journal *Screen*, particularly in the early 1970s, has been an important forum for publishing film theory and critical explorations of the relationship between semiology, Marxism and psychoanalysis. Slavoj Žižek also amplifies the political implications of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory with reference to film and popular culture.

In another strand of cultural studies that emerged by the early 1970s, culture was considered less an expression of local practices and class identity than a site of conflict, negotiation, and resistance within a system of domination. In this light, cultural studies scholars became increasingly attentive to the concept of “hegemony.” Though his work was not available in English until the 1970s, Antonio Gramsci had theorized the concept in the 1920s and 1930s to describe how relations or structures of power dominate, not by coercion, but by achieving the consent of the dominated. Thus, the education system may be an apparatus for perpetuating dominant ideology by producing conforming citizens. This lens provides a means of analyzing the dynamic process of cultural formation and places emphasis on the situatedness of particular formations, since both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic forces alter their content as conditions change: strategies of domination and resistance are improvised and continually revised.

Semiotic analysis provided a means of critiquing hegemonic effects, and particularly of identifying signifying practices and the ways they were circulated by institutions and media. For instance, Roland Barthes’ *Mythologies* (1957, translated from the French in 1972) examines the “codes”—in phenomena like a wrestling match, a tourist guidebook, Greta Garbo’s face, and a photograph of a black soldier saluting the French flag—through which values particular to specific social groups are rendered universal and “natural” for the whole of society. Predominantly semiotic approaches to cultural studies have continued: for instance, James Clifford analyzes the formation of “Western subjectivity” in an “art-culture” system founded on individual possession and collection in “On Collecting Art and Culture” (*The Predicament of Culture* 1988), and Stuart Hall provides a theoretical account of how messages are produced and disseminated with reference to television, putting the semiotic paradigm in a social framework in “Encoding/Decoding” (1993). Hall’s model of encoding/decoding, which emphasizes the contextualized negotiation and resistance of specific segments of an audience to the “preferred meanings” advanced by media organizations, stimulated empirical and theoretical work, particularly in television research (see Morley 1992).

The mainstream of cultural studies, on the whole, has been less influenced by theories that emphasize the determining effect of power structures than by work that focuses on local differences and the agency of individuals in forming themselves and their lives by means of particular strategies and practices. Cultural production is instead largely regarded as a process of “hybridization” or “negotiation,” in which particular individuals or communities actively create new meanings from available signs and cultural products. Moreover, cultural studies has been particularly concerned

with the conflict between different interest groups over the meaning of particular signs, especially as groups with little power appropriate cultural products to their own ends. Consequently, cultural studies turned increasingly to particularized sites within larger cultural systems, like subcultures, from which the processes of negotiation may be analyzed. For instance, Dick Hebdige analyzes British working-class youth subcultures from teddy boys to punks with particular reference to fashion and music in *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979). Other influential texts in this vein include Paul Willis's *Learning to Labour* (1977), David Morley's *The "Nationwide" Audience* (1980) and *Resistance through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain* (1976), edited by Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson.

By the late 1970s, cultural studies work was increasingly influenced by French theorists, including Pierre Bourdieu, Michel de Certeau, and Michel Foucault. Bourdieu, in particular, developed a sociological framework of distinct, partially autonomous "fields," defined by dimensions like family, work, peer groups, educational apparatuses, and political parties, each having its own material forms, goals, signifying practices, and place in a hierarchy of fields. Individuals are socialized into multiple fields, like work, family, and peer groups, and each field may have a variety of styles of belonging (casual or "hard core"). This framework, when interpreted more loosely than Bourdieu allows, provides a means for nuanced accounts of negotiations of "self-formation," transgressive strategies like passive resistance and symbolic inversion, as well as of ways transgression may be institutionalized. See, for example, Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984) and Peter Stallybrass and Allon White's *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (1986). Foucault's work, though interdisciplinary and wide-ranging, centers on systems of knowledge or "regimes of truth," technologies of the self, and the constitution of subjectivities, frequently using archaeological or genealogical models. The influence of this wave of French theory presented a departure from earlier cultural studies in its emphasis on decentralized power structures and localized resistance in the gaps of a larger cultural system.

Over time, cultural studies became increasingly oriented to decentered, fragmented models of culture and society, and to what Cornel West later described as "the culture of difference" in "The New Cultural Politics of Difference" (1990). The field had become increasingly internationalized as analyses of racism, sexism and the culture industry appealed to audiences in the U.S. and Australia. One strand of cultural studies aims less at radical transformation of the system of culture as a whole to achieve social equality, than at relations that would protect existing differences. Attention shifts, in this strain, to elaborating on the values, identities, and ethics of relatively

autonomous subcultural groups, including ethnic and women's groups. In this climate of affirming "otherness," Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of "heteroglossia"—that language formations in themselves can inscribe multiple "voices" or codes—took on a new resonance as a model for preserving the multiplicity of voices in a pluralistic society.

As cultural studies gained an increasingly global perspective, it became more concerned with issues of representing otherness. Earlier cultural studies' interest in the working class and subcultures was augmented, particularly in the U.S., by interest in non-Western or internal migrant communities, and marginal or minority discourses. Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) analyzed images of the East that perpetuated Western ideology while discounting the self-representation of non-Westerners. Cultural studies absorbed a radical wing of anthropology that raised questions about the adequacy of representation of others in ethnography (see James Clifford's "On Ethnographic Authority" in *Predicament of Culture* 1988). Cultural studies has questioned the processes of knowledge production, especially those based on statistical techniques, and has mainly used qualitative research in order to avoid claims to objectivity. However, the debate about ethnographic methods continues.

The emphasis on marginal discourses and the growing sense of a transnational commercial culture has contributed to the emergence of new interest in mass cultural forms. Whereas early cultural studies conceived of mass culture as a threat to the identity of local communities, popular cultural products are now argued to be an expressive vehicle with important political consequences, even positive ones. For example, John Fiske argues in "British Cultural Studies and Television" (1987) that Madonna offers fans a feminist ideology-critique, calling into question "binary oppositions as a way of conceptualizing women" (275). Critiques of this sort attempt to provide nuanced analyses of the relations between cultural markets and cultural products, with attention to the ways that such forms may be "progressive" as well as the ways transgression may be co-opted by market forces. Such critiques of mass culture figure prominently in the mainstream of cultural studies today.

### Cultural Studies and Folklore

While cultural studies and folklore share many of the same goals, sensibilities, and approaches, there may be obstacles to exchange between the two fields, particularly in some skepticism on both sides regarding the preoccupations of the other. Folklorists who privilege studies of face-to-face events and small social groups, largely via ethnographic fieldwork, may be skeptical of the quantities of cultural studies research that lack those

attributes. Some folklorists may also be wary of the self-reflective tendency of cultural studies, especially if they suspect that self-reflection or *a priori* theoretical commitments interfere with observation and accurate representation of the subject of study. Conversely, some cultural studies scholars may be less interested in folklore research that privileges face-to-face events or ethnographic methods without engaging in self-reflective theoretical examination of the foundations for that kind of knowledge production. While by no means does all cultural studies research rigorously examine its own claims to authority, it does tend to address explicitly issues of knowledge production. At the risk of over-generalizing, while folklorists and cultural studies researchers may be engaged in similar projects, they may differ in where they place emphasis: folklorists may be committed most to representing their subject and empirically validating their research, while cultural studies researchers are more interested in testing or revising theoretical propositions with reference to case studies.

A special issue of *Western Folklore*, "Theorizing Folklore: Toward New Perspectives on the Politics of Culture" (1993), directly addresses the promises and problems of dialogue between researchers in folklore and other disciplines who are engaged in cultural research. In their Introduction, Charles Briggs and Amy Shuman note the significance of the contribution of folklore scholarship, particularly *Toward New Perspectives in Folklore* (1972), to other disciplines concerned with the social contexts of human communicative behavior. They also note the capacity of work in folklore to contribute to the ongoing development of research consonant with cultural studies. However, they argue that folklore scholarship as a whole has failed to heed "the current call for a politics of culture" (130), particularly by undertheorizing the ways its own disciplinary foundations and methods are implicated in the same process of cultural production that cultural scholars have critiqued in other settings.

Nevertheless, folklorists may make significant contributions to work in cultural studies. E.P. Thompson argues, for instance, that the work of folklorists with historical popular sources may be invaluable to social historians for providing evidence of social norms that are not articulated elsewhere, citing his own study of 18th-century ruling class domination as a case in point (1978). Folklore also has a well-developed tradition of theorizing and managing social advocacy that may contribute to a practical foundation for cultural studies' rhetoric of "engaged analysis" (see Briggs and Shuman 1993:129). Moreover, Briggs and Shuman point out that folklore, more than other disciplines, has theorized the "popular" in ways that productively challenge the marginalization of the popular in dominant academic discourse (130). In addition, folklore's contribution to area studies, particularly non-



Western subjects, could enlarge the predominantly Western orientation of much cultural studies work.

Cultural studies has been variously described as cross-disciplinary, interdisciplinary, undisciplined, and postdisciplinary, yet it is still challenged from within by the divide between the interests and approaches of the humanities and the social sciences. Such disciplinary divides have obstructed exchange and cross-fertilization, even as the perspectives of cultural studies have challenged disciplinarity as a cultural formation. Cultural studies is opening up new possibilities for convergences among traditional disciplines and areas of study, but those possibilities are still only beginning to emerge and develop. Folklore may have much to contribute to cultural studies in this regard, particularly given its own success in negotiating a position between the humanities and social sciences. Folklore is itself a convergence of interests and approaches to the study of culture that permits wide-ranging, yet affiliated studies. As such, it may serve as both a model and a partner to cultural studies.

### Notes

1“New Historicism” represents an allied movement in English literature studies, in its interest in the interdependence of historical artifacts and their social and political contexts.

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