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*Cultural Studies*

Edited by Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula A. Treichler  
Routledge

## Reviewed by Jim White

Cultural studies - the field - is an emergent, interdisciplinary grouping of intellectuals working inside and outside the academy to address questions of power and subordination in contemporary industrialized society. *Cultural Studies* - the book - is a wide-ranging text that embodies all of the tensions of this description suggests. Inconclusive and dynamic, both the field cultural studies and the book, a collection of papers most of which were presented at a 1990 conference at the University of Illinois (Urbana-Champaign), represent an important wing of critical scholarship that has been developing since the mid 1960s when the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham, England was founded. Since then, the field has grown both geographically and theoretically, taking hold in Australia and the United States, and expanding upon its original Marxist influences to answer the challenges of postmodernism, feminism and questions of race. Defining cultural studies is always difficult. And indeed, its practitioners usually refuse definitions - a way in which they attempt to maintain the field's fluid and noninstitutional nature. Still, commonalities of method, theory and goal direct cultural studies work. As its name suggests, the field deals with the realm of culture, which, for purposes of analysis, it constructs in two ways - culture as art, literature, media, music, etc., and culture as the lived experiences of people in contemporary society, what contributor John Fiske calls "the culture of everyday life." This conceptualization of its subject area has resulted in a strange diversity of work within the field, ranging from an ethnography of British working class youth culture, to studies of family television viewing habits, to the ideological readings of everything from colonial accounts of widow burning in early nineteenth-century Bengal to *Hustler* magazine. But what runs through the entire body of cultural studies is a desire to make scholarship relevant to "real life" conditions of oppression. And it is here where the field is the most self-critical and contested. Nowhere is this more evident than in *Cultural Studies*.

The book contains some 30 papers delivered at the conference "Cultural Studies Now and in the Future," which brought together critical

scholars from around the globe and from a number of disciplines. A handful of other chapters not originally presented at the conference round out the book. Also, an introduction by editors Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson and Paula A. Treichler effectively locates *Cultural Studies* within the overall development of the field, and a postscript by sociologist Angela McRobbie looks ahead to cultural studies' future. Altogether, 40 chapters appear in the table of contents. The book is lengthy, close to 800 pages filled with often dense theoretical analysis. The papers appear alphabetically by author's last name. To help the reader cope, the editors provide a "reader's guide" following their introduction which lists the papers by broad subject headings. A glance at the headings gives an idea of the breadth of work associated with cultural studies. They include: gender and sexuality; nationhood and national identity; colonialism and postcolonialism; race and ethnicity; popular culture and its audiences; pedagogy; the politics of disciplinarity; science, culture and the ecosystem; and rereading history, among others. The editors suggest, however, that, due to the pervasiveness of some of the book's topics, "the only way to get at them is to read the book and make your own map of its contents" (p. 17).

Perhaps the most interesting component of *Cultural Studies* is the question-and-answer sessions that follow each conference paper. Although they have been edited and in some cases revised, these transcribed discussions give the reader an idea of the intensity of debate that drives the field, and gives the book a dynamic quality that is representative of the field itself. This format mirrors another book, *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Grossberg and Nelson, which grew out of a 1983 conference at Illinois and was published in 1988. Though it is the single-most comprehensive text on the field so far, *Cultural Studies* is not a paradigm-setting collection. Indeed, cultural studies can be seen as being, by its practitioners' own desire, anti-paradigmatic. As McRobbie explains, "For cultural studies to survive it cannot afford to lose this disciplinary looseness, this feeling that, like other areas of radical inquiry... its authors are making it up as they go along" (p. 722). The result is a text that explodes cultural studies' lines of inquiry rather than summarize or contain them; that challenges the theoretical underpinnings of the field; and that renders more problematic the field's own scholarly practices. Almost every chapter includes some critique of the role of critical intellectuals in society and the relevance of theory to the everyday lives of people.

Tony Bennett, for example, argues that by expanding its definition of culture to include the area of governmental cultural policy, cultural studies "may be deflected from precisely those forms of banality which, in some quarters, have already claimed it" and also resist "the lure of those debates whose contrived appearance of ineffable complexity makes them a death trap for practical thinking" (p. 33). Cornel West discusses how intellectuals, "in a world full of so much social misery and loss of social hope... can justify ourselves as being significant in contributing to the struggle" (p. 690). And most pointedly of all, Stuart Hall wonders, "Against the urgency of people dying in the streets, what in God's name is the point of cultural studies?" (p. 284).

All of the book's contributors struggle with a key problematic of critical scholarly work - that its practice in some instances may contribute to the maintenance of divisions in society rather than helping to heal those divisions. In the book, debates arise over the elitism implied by the tendency of cultural scholars to distinguish between themselves, a knowing community of intellectuals, and "the people," whom they study; over the institutionalization of cultural studies especially in America; and over the often intimidating and exclusive nature of academic discourse. As Jan Zita Grover, in one of the book's finest chapters, "AIDS, Keywords, and Cultural Work," states, "For writers who profess to have an interest in what 'the people' think and do, academic critics seem remarkably uninterested in addressing their remarks to those same people" (p. 228). Indeed, as some attendees pointed out in a heated debate following Hall's lecture on "The Theoretical Legacy of Cultural Studies," even the conference itself fell short of facilitating ideal democratic participation. The sentiment that the conference was organized in such a way as to privilege the speech of presenters and "star" participants, and marginalize other, not-so-prestigious attendees, is represented in the book by discussant Alexandra Chasin who remarks, "In its structure, the conference most definitely privileges certain people, empowering them to speak while disempowering others... One or two rounds of applause for graduate student labor and for staff helping with conference 'mechanics' does not go very far towards changing a familiar and oppressive division of labor" (p. 293). But the very inclusion of such remarks in *Cultural Studies* illustrates a characteristic of the field that is absent in most other areas of scholarly work - that it is able to and often does apply its modes of analysis to its own practices. This is something that is demonstrated again and again throughout the book.

*Cultural Studies* also effectively demonstrates the field's interdisciplinarity. This it accomplishes simply in its magnitude. The book contains many contributors from many disciplines who cover a number of subjects. Laura Kipnis, a video artist and teacher in the Department of Radio, TV and Film at Northwestern University, provides a reading of *Hustler* magazine that complicates some feminist perspectives on porn. English professor Simon Frith examines cultural approaches to the study of popular music. Literature professor Janice Radway discusses how debates over the Book-of-the-Month Club were waged on the terrain of liberal-democratic ideals. Grover, a former literature teacher who now works with AIDS agencies, argues that the academy fails to engage with the real-life struggles of those affected by AIDS. Art critic Douglas Crimp also takes up the issue of AIDS, challenging popular media representations of persons with AIDS. Anthropologist Emily Martin discusses how dominant social hierarchies are reproduced in scientific literature describing reproduction. James Clifford, professor in the History of Consciousness Program at the University of California, Santa Cruz, conceptualizes culture as travel to better account for the sites of displacement, interference and interaction in contemporary societies. Professor of English Andrew Ross analyzes the ideology of the New Age movement. Communication scholar Rosalind Brunt attempts to render the notion of audience in media research more problematic by drawing on her work on public opinion formation. Freelance writer Meaghan Morris addresses culture and cultural studies in Australia. And Hall, professor of sociology at Open University and one of the field's founders, traces the theoretical legacies of cultural studies, from Marx and Gramsci to poststructuralism and feminism. And the list goes on.

While *Cultural Studies* contains some of the best work to be done in recent years, it also has its weaker moments. Some contributions, whether theoretically effective in scholarly terms or not, fail in their ability to engage with the field's social purpose. One of the major theoretical advancements cultural studies claims, and rightly so, is the dismantling of the Marxist base/superstructure paradigm, which introduced culture rather than economy as the primary site of political struggle. But, just as some vulgar Marxists prioritize to a fault the role of the economic base in determining power relations, some cultural work overemphasizes culture's role in maintaining dominance or, more commonly, providing opportunities for resistance. In *Cultural Studies*, John Fiske, for instance, argues that subal-

tern groups seize the cultural signs and productions of their oppressors and reproduce them at the personal level in a way that empowers them. Fiske offers the example of a couple of renters who have filled their apartment with manufactured trinkets such as plastic flowers and argues that in doing so, "The signs of money are taken out of the economic system of the dominant and inserted into the culture of the subaltern and their social force is thus complicated" (p. 157). In this way, Fiske argues, the oppressed participate actively in the construction of social differences rather than merely accepting "top-down" assignments of identity from the power bloc. But how this practice challenges current structures of real power, such as the distribution of wealth, isn't clear.

*Cultural Studies* also is not without examples of what Stuart Hall has called elsewhere a "hyperabstraction and overtheoreticism" and an abandonment of "the problems of concrete historical analysis" (Hall, 1988). Impenetrable discourse, overtheorization and an annoying penchant for scholarly "hipness" (see for example Angie Chabram-Dernersesian's chapter "I Throw Punches for My Race, but I Don't Want to Be a Man: Writing Us - Chica-nos (Girl,Us)/ Chicanas - into the Movement Script" or Donna Haraway's "The Promises of Mosters: A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/d Others") cloud the social relevance of some of the contributions. Hommi Bhabha's discussion of "Postcolonial Authority and Postmodern Guilt," for instance, a paper of "forbidding difficulty" as one participant put it (p. 67), was intellectually out of reach for most conference attendees. What I am sure was an important argument was lost amidst Bhubha's self-serving prose.

These chapter do serve the purpose, however, of illustrating the kind of scholarship other contributors - such as Bennett and Grover - challenge. Their presence allows the reader to follow the many lines of debate in the field first-hand, and contributes to the book's unique volatile feel. *Cultural Studies* is an important text which contains the attempts of some of today's most prominent critical intellectuals to blend scholarship and social purpose. For the new-comer to cultural studies, the book is a comprehensive introduction. For those familiar with cultural work, it is an indispensable elaboration. For the field, it is the most significant moment of development in several years.