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REWORDING/REWARDING CULTURE: (POST)CULTURAL
STUDIES AND THE SHAME OF BEING 'DIFFERENT'

Abstract

In his *Keywords*, Raymond Williams states that “Culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language” (Williams 1977: 76). This paper engages with the complex ways in which a methodological approach born in the UK as part of the culture of the New Left, and conceived as a hybrid tendency across disciplines rather than a discipline in itself, is reshaped in the Italian academic context. I will see how English Cultural Studies in Italy tends to be perceived as a Janus-faced approach, inheriting Hoggart’s and Williams’s attempt at adapting techniques of literary analysis for the study of a variety of cultural formations and Stuart Hall’s emphasis on language as *the* practice grounding signification and producing cultural representations (Hall and Open University 1997: 4-6). While recognising Eagleton’s position that “Literature [...] inherits the weighty ethical, ideological and even political tasks which were once entrusted to rather more technical and practical discourses” (Eagleton 2000: 40), I will consider how this position should include Hall’s notion that “culture is about shared meanings and meanings can only be shared through our common access to language” (Hall and Open University 1997: 1-2). In a postcolonial and globalised perspective, and with an eye to the current European contingency concerning migration, I will focus on how the Italian approach to Cultural Studies can help us to tackle the ambiguity recently pointed out by Simon Gikandi, who claimed that English literature is simultaneously “one of the most universal phenomena” and “one of the most parochial disciplines” (Gikandi 2001: 650). This requires English Cultural Studies to strongly engage with Postcolonial and Migration Studies, and again raises the question of what we call ‘Cultural Studies’ and how this theory is located in the Italian context.

Keywords: Cultural Studies in Italy; (Post)Cultural Turn; Migration Studies; Postcolonial Studies.

1. *Looking for It: Motherless Languages at a Loss for New Words*

I grew up thinking of words as spells possessing the magic power to shape the world. My current work moves from the same kind of preliminary assumption, which also represents one of the founding principles of the original critical project going by the definition of ‘Contemporary Cultural Studies’. In the Italian academic world, and not only there, this has always been a contested space. The inbuilt diversification of approaches, the slippery nature of the definition, the commitment tenet and the persisting reference to texts that belong to our contemporary world add to the field’s natural complexity. And within this frame, language proves a key factor in reshaping an effective critical approach to the issue of representation.

My starting point is the assumption that language *means* and, in many respects, *rules*. In his seminal work on representation, Stuart Hall defines language as a “signifying practice” (1997: 1), precisely because “[a]ny representational system [...] can be thought of as working, broadly speaking, according to the principles of representation through language” (1997: 5). By all means, therefore, language is *the* beginning, and literature, embedded as it is in the cosy if nondescript frame of culture, consists in the meaningful use of language. Once accepted that language is a signifying practice belonging to a definite circuit of culture, it is to be inferred that the process of signification can only take place within the borders of a community providing sense to its own representations. In the fifth chapter of his *Local Histories/Global Designs*, Walter D. Mignolo reflects on the complicity between language, literature, culture and nation, reinforcing the need for a relation between linguistic maps and literary geographies (Mignolo 2000: 218). This complicity, by itself a resource for broadening the limits of human knowledge, is in fact neutralised by the current, and unfortunately agreed upon, assessment of the humanities in the academic context at large. While describing the current strictures imposed on fields of knowledge, Mignolo points out that “the restrictive rules operating in cultures of scholarship are based on the belief that literature is fine, but doesn’t constitute serious knowledge” (2000: 222). In short, as humanists, we raise very important issues but we are a basically useless bunch of people. What has been silently applied, in academic research and in Italy in particular, is a sort of ‘imperialism of the mind’ that seems to have recently increased and that sharply opposes science and literature, burning out nuances in academic education and research. It is my conviction that, in the face of this clear-cut dichotomy functionally used to show how unpractical the humanities are, Cultural Studies as a project covers an

in-between space that may prove extraordinarily useful, even when stubbornly marginalised.

In this light, as a researcher educated in the field of Literary Studies and then jumping the line and converging towards the critical analysis of popular cultures, my first problem is understanding how culture and literature relate. Franco Moretti may be of some help in this respect. In his recent essay on World Literature, he introduces a number of very interesting reflections on Literary Studies and change, encouraging both younger and older scholars to overcome the limits of their training: "Scientific work always has limits. But limits change" (Moretti 2000: 54). I firmly believe that culture and literature, in terms of both formation and research, are not only compatible, but also relevant to each other, and they may safely carry some of us across the limits Moretti talks about. The real issue is not *what* kind of texts we must approach – which seem to be largely the same for Literary Studies and Cultural Studies – but *how* we are supposed to approach them, by which sort of critical tools and, most of all, in my view, to which purposes. And, in any case, the close link between culture and literature stands right at the origin of Cultural Studies in the UK. The interwoven action of the two fields of research is posited by Raymond Williams – himself a disciple of F.R. Leavis – via the definitions he provides for both of them in his *Keywords*. As far as culture is concerned, he states that the word "is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language. This is so partly because of its intricate historical development, in several European languages, but mainly because it has now come to be used for important concepts in several distinct intellectual disciplines and in several distinct and incompatible systems of thought" (Williams 1977: 76-77). Regarding 'literature', he admits that "it is a difficult word, in part because its conventional contemporary meaning appears, at first sight, so simple. There is no apparent difficulty in phrases like English literature or contemporary literature, until we find occasion to ask whether all books and writing are literature (and if they are not, which kinds are excluded and by what criteria) or until, to take a significant example, we come across a distinction between literature and drama on the grounds, apparently, that drama is a form primarily written for spoken performance" (Williams 1977: 150-51).

About both words, he acknowledges complexity as a marking feature. In both cases, he examines the semantic development of each word, referring to relevant observations about the development of their meanings through time and in relation to specific national spaces. He becomes more specific (and introduces differences) when he tries to put his finger on the defining features of each word. With reference to literature, he specifies

that the “teaching of English, especially in universities, is understood as the teaching of literature, meaning mainly poems and plays and novels” (Williams 1977: 152-53), thus pointing out the tendency to separate hierarchically “literature” from “literacy” and negatively marking the notion of the literary canon as stable (p. 154). About culture, he reminds us that “Culture in all its early uses was a noun of process” (p. 77).

In short, in the 1970s and while trying to reconnect academic studies to popular cultures, Raymond Williams drew some meaningful borders that are, however, to be conceived as permeable and changeable. In the awareness that “limits change” (Moretti 2000: 54), we should emphasise the need to recover a critical praxis capable of pushing theory beyond the abstract field of humanist research (as traditionally intended) and providing a meaning – alongside an identifiable role – to the choice of being a humanist in a given community. This critical practice finds its core in the ability to develop new tools for new social and cultural conditions, somehow always

working in an area of displacement. There is always something decentred about the medium of culture, about language, textuality and signification, which always escapes and evades the attempt to link it, directly and immediately, with other structures. And yet, at the same time, the shadow, the imprint, the trace, of those other formations, of the intertextuality of texts in their institutional positions, of texts as sources of power, of textuality as a site of representation and resistance, all of those questions can never be erased from cultural studies. (Hall *et al.* [1991] 1992: 285)

The issue of resistance as a function of history also allows for the rejection of any form of fixed theory which would crystallise the method of critical analysis and therefore impair the possibility to choose the right tools for the right moment, in full congruence with one’s own positionalities.

2. *The (Post)Cultural Turn, or the Advantages of Being on a Border*

The prefix ‘post-’ is sexy mostly because it does not mean, but is given meaning by the coming-after contingency. Hence my resistance to introducing a definition grounded in this nondescript practice. My use of the prefix in brackets comes from an awareness of the need to re-semantise the work of the humanist today, years after the so-called ‘cultural turn’ which took place in the 1970s and has been mentioned by Stuart Hall, among others, as a turning point in Cultural Studies (1997: 5 ff). The (post)cultural turn may effectively designate the at-

tempt at adjusting the notion of culture and the work on popular culture according to hanging spaces (that are now global) and different times (whose pace of change has been accelerating in recent years). More practically, the point is: what is the social, cultural, and empirical role of the humanist in a globalised and ever-changing environment? And to what extent may Cultural Studies help to take into account the fact that, as researchers, we do have positionalities, but “those positionalities are never final, they’re never absolute” (Hall 1992: 279)?

In considering the risks of choosing to be part of an open-ended project, I would spend a few words in favour of inhabiting a critical borderland. As any intersectional space, *limina* exhibit a Janus-faced quality: they imply more distance from the centre (hence from power) and therefore more freedom, but they lack the safety of canonised knowledge. It should be remembered that this is why Cultural Studies must constantly authorise their theoretical tools, to avoid being marked as ‘not scientific’ and therefore not relevant, as well as subaltern.

In a 1976 lecture, while speaking of the “insurrection of subjugated knowledges”, Foucault made some statements that may come in handy here. By subjugated knowledges, Foucault explains, “one should understand [...] a whole set of knowledges that has been disqualified as inadequate to its tasks or insufficiently elaborated: naïve knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity”. He then specified that such knowledges are given as “low-ranking”, “differential” and “incapable of unanimity” (Foucault [1976] 1994: 210). The viability of these definitions with reference to the current consideration given to Cultural Studies in the academic environment, in Italy and in some other national contexts, is surprising. However, they may also prove extremely promising if considered in a different perspective. Cultural Studies is “low-ranking” in that it deliberately chooses to be on the side of popular cultures. It is “differential” in that it values comparison as a relevant tool in any critical approach. And it is “incapable of unanimity” since it seems to be resolutely grounded in intersectional approaches, including a variety of methods and giving space and voice to often silenced fields¹.

Let’s be clear about it: borders can be beautiful, particularly in the (post)academy. And, joking apart, they can produce very interesting contaminations and forms of hybridisation. In recent times, an increas-

¹ I am referring to the round table involving Stuart Hall, Rosi Braidotti, Ien Ang, Alan Grossman, Judith Halberstam, Dick Hebdige and many others, which took place within the frame of the Cultural Studies Now Conference, at UEL, London from 19 to 22 July 2007.

ing number of scholars – mostly locating themselves in the field of Post-colonial Studies and even sociology and anthropology – have come to claim that literature and the humanities in general tend to anticipate and ‘give words’ to changes in society that would otherwise go unnoticed, or would be ‘scientifically’ studied later on. Simon Gikandi (2001), in a seminal essay on globalisation, claims that literature was able to foresee the current breaking down of the Enlightenment vision of Europe as a civilised place. Paul Gilroy, in *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?* (2006), quotes Shakespeare and Melville to reflect on some relevant, and sorrowful, current issues in European and US cultures. And in another recent study (Gilroy 2014), he reads the tragedy of migration in the Mediterranean sea by evoking the ancient colonial hierarchies which once developed in the same space. Sandro Mezzadra (2015) mentions Conrad in his analysis of the condition of today’s migrants and tries to show how *Heart of Darkness* poetically anticipated some of our contemporary sociological reflections. Quite meaningfully, Terry Eagleton, in *The Idea of Culture* (2000), reminds us of T.S. Eliot’s *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* and points out how the poet defined culture as a word designating the whole way of life of a people, in an obvious connection with anthropology and sociology.

The complexity of these issues is beyond question, but it seems clear to me that the dichotomy culture/literature runs the risk of shaping a *nomos* that implies a double standard of research and sometimes discards as marginal a field that Lidia Curti, in her wonderful essay “What is Real and What is Not: Female Fabulation in Cultural Analysis” (Curti in Grossberg, Nelson, Treichler [1991] 1992), defines instead as central to our formation as critical intellectuals.

So, what are we supposed to do? How are we supposed “to analyze certain things about the constitutive and political nature of representation itself, about its complexities, about the effects of language, about textuality as a site of life and death”? In Hall’s view, “[t]hose are the things cultural studies can address” (Hall in Grossberg, Nelson, Treichler [1991] 1992: 284).

3. *The Issue of Naming*

I have reached the age at which, no matter how long the rest of my career as a professor might be, one is bound to draw some conclusions. Since I have always found it difficult to comply with the academic obsession with borders – an obsession that has at times been extremely useful in protecting species in danger of extinction – I tend to approach research through the same general beliefs I hold about the use of labels

in any field: they are functional when, and if, they result in some kind of order that works towards a better understanding, but they must be discarded when, and if, they obstruct knowledge by introducing a kind of unwanted rigidity. Obviously enough, research develops, too, and responds to contextual stimuli. The borders between Literary Studies and Cultural Studies – even admitting that they have ever existed – have certainly been redrawn a number of times since the birth of Contemporary Cultural Studies. Many literary scholars, whose faith in the need for literary studies to be 'literary' is adamant, often choose to delve into the process of film adaptations from novels or plays. This is perfectly legitimate and it may be done from a variety of critical perspectives (Cartmell and Whelehan 1999). However, what is in fact a natural development of a critical method, in line with an evolving set of narrative tools and structures, has on the other hand muddied the water in terms of applying labels to this kind of research and their supporters. A number of these scholars, in Italy and abroad, really seem perplexed – if not definitely annoyed – when one observes that their work may be actually going in the direction of Cultural Studies. In some cases, they feel the need to claim that they are *definitely not* doing Cultural Studies, as if it were a dangerous virus.

I wonder why such a label should be felt so dangerous by any committed scholar. The answer partly resides in the critical fluidity of the field, which, as explained above, amounts to both a resource and a limit. Yet, I think it is crucial to consider not only the possible scientific and methodological drawbacks, but also the social and emotional implications of locating oneself in this field, while at the same time being a researcher in English Studies. The institutional, critical, social and emotional aspects are in fact part of the same web. In practice, Cultural Studies presents a kind of complexity that depends on the widespread feeling that the method is 'not scientific enough' and it is also said to easily become the favourite field for researchers who are not able to devote themselves to Literary or Linguistics Studies. In real (academic) life, and if you are young and locating yourself within the project and practice of Cultural Studies, you may happen to be asked some meaningful questions concerning your identity as a researcher, teacher or professor. Such questions generally run like this:

- So this means you don't work on literature, do you?
- Your books include plenty of images, do they?
- Are you *really* working at university?
- Ok, this is not literature. Do you teach any other important subject?

- Was your literary training insufficient to deal with, say, Shakespeare, or Milton?
- Oh, I see: you're left wing (currently an insult)

The joke may be amusing or depressing, but still most of us, including myself, when facing these direct questions, tend to deny they are in the field of Cultural Studies and to declare improvised and previously unpredicted loyalties to other apparently contiguous, though more consolidated, fields (Contemporary Studies, Comparative Studies, Postcolonial Studies, and so on and so forth). I do often react like this because I fear this label may be equated to the choice of an 'amateur researcher' who claims singularity to cover ignorance, running the risk of being excluded from the main lines of research endorsed in my institutional context: culture is regarded as Caliban, a 'delicate monster' that is kept at arm's length, the length of the arm being of course variable.

Generally speaking, it is still true, as Stuart Hall maintained in 1991, that "Cultural studies has multiple discourses; it has a number of different histories". I think we should be aware that the "whole set of formations" that are supposed to be the main object of study are mostly unstable and in progress, and they unavoidably produce many, often conflicting, trajectories, resulting in "a number of different methodologies and theoretical positions, all of them in contention" (Hall [1991] 1992: 278). This explains why different national scholarly contexts provide diverging interpretations and articulations of the critical methodology which was introduced by the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, in Birmingham, as early as 1964. A further variable reinforcing the need for multiplicity in this critical approach resides in the fact that the researchers choosing to be part of the Cultural Studies project normally work on current issues and address their diachronic development as a process that is to be studied in order to properly understand what we are living here and now, in a globalised but still intensely localised environment. Globalisation hosts conflicting attitudes (Mignolo 2000; Gikandi 2001), precisely because it is a *process*, not an *achievement*. And what is happening *now* in this process is that, despite the inexorable drive towards the removal of borders (both geographical and symbolical), problems tend to be approached – even more than before and because of a protective impulse – on an intensely localised basis: more than ever, each culture produces its own vision of the world.

Therefore, my concluding remarks concern how we are to inflect Cultural Studies in the Italian research context. As I said, I entered Cultural Studies from Literary Studies. I have been trained in the English literary tradition and I have gradually developed a specific interest in

contemporary literature. The field has unfolded along lines including several, diversified forms of narrative and drawing on codes that may be different from – or not limited to – written words. As a matter of fact, for example, it is in this sense impossible to critically approach Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* without considering the film adaptations that have partly remoulded and rewritten the original story.

Now, on these grounds, my final point is: is it really useful or relevant to re-label the literary scholar as a Cultural Studies researcher because he/she is choosing a different critical perspective, the more so when this perspective seems to be required by the text itself? Would it not be more interesting to think of this critical development as a natural step forward? We evolve, or wish to do so. And in any case, in my experience, in the field of English Studies in Italy, we all entered Cultural Studies from literature. There is no reason to deny this. And most of us are still teaching literature and using literary texts in our research work. A recent survey currently under way through the online journal *Altre Modernità* has developed a reflection precisely on this issue². Three young researchers conducted interviews with Italian professors and scholars loosely referring to the field of Cultural Studies, with the aim of gaining a better definition of the approach in a specific national context. What has so far emerged from this experience is, basically, the unwillingness of the interviewed scholars to label their work as belonging to the Cultural Studies project, although in practice they develop their research along the lines of this very field.

As for myself, I have no particular interest in labels. At a certain point, I chose to locate myself within the project and practice of Cultural Studies, because this magmatic field allows me to understand contemporary literature and art more effectively; it gives me the freedom to select my tools and it provides meaning to my being a humanist here and now. My choice has its own consequences relating to both my institutional position and pedagogical practice. Following Stuart Hall, I do not think we can divorce theoretical work from pedagogy (Hall in Grossberg, Nelson, Treichler [1991] 1992), and I believe we should remember that, as a project, Cultural Studies is always open to what it does not yet know, to what it cannot yet name (Grossberg, Nelson, Treichler [1991] 1992: 279). There is no theoretical closure.

As far as pedagogy at university is concerned, my impression is that, sadly enough, the main point now consists in an increasing drive to

² The results of this survey have been published in *Altre Modernità* – Special Issue 09 (Guarracino, Monegato, Scarabelli 2018) and *Altre Modernità* – Issue 19 (Guarracino, Monegato, Scarabelli 2018: 256-317).

‘marketise’ education instead of making it more effective and up-to-date. On the contrary, I humbly believe that the direction to be taken pivots on understanding culture and knowledges, where ‘understanding’ is used both as a gerund and as an adjective.

I think all of us want to change the world through literature, language, and the humanities. Sandro Mezzadra recently stated something rather radical about Italian academic training: he said that our academic system is dramatically inefficient in its task of producing and transmitting knowledge³. Academic training and research sometimes lead to a commitment to hierarchy from birth to burial, and in some cases burial may turn premature if you fail to gain a permanent position of some kind. But, at the same time, it is my conviction that the small, unheroic task of rewording (giving new words to) literary and linguistic studies, so as to include culture, may become a highly rewarding endeavour. And, in fact, this is what we humanists are supposed to do.

³ See Sandro Mezzadra, Plenary Lecture: “Condizione postcoloniale, postcolonialismo, studi postcoloniali. Un bilancio provvisorio”, International Conference *Archivi del futuro. Il postcoloniale, l’Italia e il tempo a venire*, February 18-20, 2015, University of Padua.

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