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Introduction to Cultural Studies



## Topic 4. Introduction to Cultural Studies

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## 4.1. The importance of cultural studies

Cultural Studies are of vital importance for students of film and media today. They are one of the most efficient ways to study all forms of culture and cultural representations and, needless to say, include cinema and other forms of media amongst their interests. A good definition of what they are is what follows:

'an INTERDISCIPLINARY and INTELLECTUAL MOVEMENT that combines different schools in order to study cultural phenomena in societies. Some of the most relevant schools are: literary theory, communication and media, film studies, sociology, political economy, arts...'

It is, indeed, a rather imprecise definition, but that is so because Cultural Studies do not aim at being precise at all. It is a discipline which is 1) ambitious, for it comprises lots of other disciplines and schools and 2) welcoming, for it is very open to the incorporation of schools and people from all over the world, and certainly from other disciplines.

The following sections will remark the importance of Cultural studies for people who study culture in general, and film, television and other media in particular. Suffice it to say, for now, that some decades ago there was a lot of scepticism about the usefulness of cultural studies as a means to better understand cultural phenomena; this has changed now and it can be said that it is the most popular discipline (although both 'popular' and 'discipline' are words insufficient to describe Cultural studies) in most universities all over the world. The following section will briefly look at the history of Cultural studies in order to analyse 1) the legacy of the history of Cultural studies; 2) the evolution of Cultural studies; and 3) the place of Cultural studies in our society.

## 4.2. Origins and history

Cultural studies are not an old discipline, as yet, and in fact many people may consider it as something still new. This is due to the fact that Cultural studies have arrived late to many countries, including Spain, where it is still in a process of adaptation (and this is not to deny the importance, success or popularity of Cultural studies in Spain).

The following lines will present, very succinctly, five important moments in the origins and history of Cultural studies. They are not a chronological explanation of Cultural studies but, rather, an approach to five crucial moments or tendencies that have shaped, enriched and made Cultural studies popular.

### 4.2.1. Politics and Marxist influence.

This roughly covers the first steps of Cultural studies, around the 1960s, especially in the United Kingdom. Cultural studies still have a strong political bias, for which many people have criticised it.

Cultural studies have been, since their very origins, concerned with the question of class oppression, and how the division of our society into different classes, after economic and political reasons, determines the ways in which we consume and produce culture. There are many ways in which this is applicable to cinema. For instance, Cultural studies are essential to explain the difference between commercial cinema and the cinema of the Third world and other cultures. Likewise, a Marxist approach to cinema can be helpful to explain concepts which are very dear and familiar to film scholars, such as 'escapist cinema', 'required happy end', 'political bias', 'industry demands', 'ratings', and many others.

### 4.2.2. The arrival of feminism and gender theory.

This strong political and philosophical movement arrived to Cultural studies in the 1970s and has left one of the strongest legacies, to the extent that it is one of the most popular movements within Cultural studies today.

The 1960s are remembered for the many revolutions that took place all over the Western world. They were the years of the Viet-nam war. Students in the United States demonstrated against oppression and army-ruled policies, while racial and sexual minorities fought for their right. In France, May 1968 represented the explosion of an unsatisfied younger generation. This agitated climax provided the world with new ideas and tendencies, which very soon reached universities and thinkers, and sometimes inspired new ways to look at culture. The new concerns with gender, of which Feminism was one (possibly, the most important) trend, became more and more powerful, as they still are today.

After the incorporation of feminism to Cultural studies, the way people look at films and television has never been the same. Laura Mulvey wrote in 1975 a very important article, 'Visual Pleasure and narrative cinema', which is still discussed and admired by many people. It questioned the representation, role and participation of women in Film History, as well as the ways of reception, and female spectatorship. She introduced very important terms which Feminist and Gender scholars of today use all the time, such as 'gaze', 'passivity', 'identification', and many others. A big change had taken, and progressively the Media industry took Gender and Feminism in consideration.

#### 4.2.3. American vs. European approach.

One of the things that made Cultural studies such a rich enterprise is that it was not developed in one single place or time. On the contrary, different schools, departments and other groups of people, developed Cultural studies simultaneously. Two main trends can be located: American Cultural studies (that is, North American) and European Cultural Studies. This division is admittedly restrictive, and the differences between, say, French and British Cultural Studies are easy to note. But it is a division that serves to illustrate how Cultural studies has 1) influence the entire Western world and 2) been constructed as a building with strong pillars that are cemented in different cultures. This results in a solid architecture and allows students and scholars to go and find the best approach for their given object of study. Let us think of this example: American film noirs of the 1940s have been studied by people from the United States, as well as by people from France, the United Kingdom, Spain... Also, it has been studied by scholars during the 1960s, 70s, 80s, 90s, 2000s and 10s. how do this transnational, transgenerational, transcultural approaches contribute to best understanding our object of study. It is the plurarity of Cultural studies, which has been present since their very origins, what makes them such a useful powerful tool.

#### 4.2.4. Post-modernism.

When we study an artistic movement or the cultural specificities of a given period, we need to name it. Sometimes, the names can be given in retrospect (for instance, if we talk about 'classic art'). Other times, we find names contemporaneously (as happened, for instance, to the Surrealists, who were very aware of their status as a group and a tendency in the Arts). Post-modernism is the label that we have found to designate many of the things that are happening today in our culture. Thus, the tendencies ascribed to Post-modernism are very important to Cultural studies. This is not to say that Post-modernism is part of Cultural studies, as much as Cultural studies is part of post-modernism. More appropriately, it could be argued that they co-exist in the contemporary world.

For many critics, one of Post-modernism's biggest flaws is the lack of perspective, as it tries to cover and study what is happening at the moment, in a way, as it happens. This is a criticism that has been made to Cultural studies too,, and in this aspect they are very similar. Having said that, it would be very fruitless to conclude that what is happening now cannot be indeed studies, no matter if there is perspective or there is not.

This is not the place to study post-modernism in depth, as this is an introductory course and students are expected to develop their knowledge in future courses and readings. But it is very important that some ideas are introduced (albeit informally), so that students are familiar to some of the tendencies of Post-modernism. In order to do so, the following lines will present some artists who are meant to be representative of Post-modernism. These are:

- Quentin Tarantino. He represents one attribute which many critics associate to Post-modern art: the interweaving of different narratives that create a complex net in which questions which have traditionally been very important are relegated to a second place. These questions include: hierarchy (who is the main character in Pulp Fiction?), objective

perspective as a source of meaning, distinction between high and low culture.

- Madonna. Few singers personify Post-modernism as well as this artist does. She presents, amongst many other features of Post-modernism, a talent for the use of Collage. Post-modernism has questioned ideas of huge relevance, such as plagiarism, pastiche, tribute, recycling of other sources... the use of previous material is an important feature of artistic creation in the contemporary world. Other artists who have excelled on this are Andy Warhol, Pedro Almodóvar, Charlie Kaufman...
- David Lynch is another filmmaker who has excelled at working on one of Postmodernism's most characteristic features: the interest in liminal spaces. The idea is that the meaning is often generated most effectively through the spaces and transitions and collisions between elements such as words and moments and images.
- The Cohen Brothers are useful to understand one more feature of postmodernism: the pastiche of genres. This has defied traditional film theory and the division of cinema in solid blocks of genres. For filmmakers such as the Cohen brothers, genres are a malleable and playful set of conventions. It is not so much about destroying them, but about exploring the possibilities of their playfulness.

### 4.3. Main characteristics.

We have already seen how Cultural Studies are the site for debates and theories that come from very different places and sources. To list the main characteristics of a discipline which does not allow to be seen as such is a task doomed to failure. However, we can attempt to pin down some of the contributions of Cultural studies. This will allow us to grasp what one can do by using Cultural Studies. The following ideas are taken from Ziauddin Sadr's *Introduction to Cultural Studies*.

- 4.3.1. It aims to examine its subject matter in terms of cultural practices and their relation to POWER. Some examples: the study of American black culture in relation to the dominant classes.
- 4.3.2. It aims to understand culture in all its complex forms and to analyse the social and political context in which culture manifests itself.
- 4.3.3. It is both the object of study and the location of political criticism and action.
- 4.3.4. It has a commitment to an ethical evaluation of modern society and to a radical line of political action.

## 4.4. The vocabulary of Cultural Studies.

The following lines present some of the most important concepts developed by cultural studies. As you study them, please think of the importance of them in contemporary cultural analysis. For instance, think of the last film review that you read, can you find any of these concepts in it?

4.1 STEREOTYPES. Look at the following link and try to answer the following questions: what is the importance of stereotypes and stereotyping in the media? Have you ever been offended by a stereotype? Are all stereotypes bad?

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gF\\_HGdK\\_oRM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gF_HGdK_oRM)

Those, and many other questions, are one of the biggest concerns of Cultural Studies.

4.2 TEXTS: any expressive work (artistic or otherwise) that can be "read", whether it uses words, images, or sounds. That is a definition for "Text", as understood by scholars of Cultural studies. Thus, a text can be a film, a comic book, a painting, a piece of music, et cetera.

4.3 MASS CULTURE. Look at the following two definitions of "Mass culture", taken from the Oxford Dictionary:

1. "Popular culture" or expression of popular tastes; large network of practices.
2. The tastes, values, and interests of the classes that dominate modern industrialized society, especially the consumer-oriented American middle class.
3. The culture that is widely disseminated via the mass media.

All of them are true, and the sum of them suggests what mass culture is for Cultural Studies. Cultural studies are known for their interest in popular culture. This was very novel and was not welcome at the beginning of Cultural studies, but is generally accepted nowadays. The interest in Mass culture is also a reflection of the legacy of Marxism in Cultural studies. The relationship between culture and power (that is, who is in control of the production of cultural texts, media groups and corporations, et cetera) is a central concern for Marxist Cultural studies.

### 4.4 POPULAR CULTURE.

The following lines introduce three of the most passionate debates about the importance of popular culture for those working under the umbrella of Cultural studies. This is a never-ending debate, and the following concepts will serve as an inspiration, as well as an introduction to some terms which will be familiar to the student who goes on working on Cultural studies.

- High versus low culture. "Middle-brow". This is, once more, a connection between the study of culture and Marxism, as it suggest a hierarchy (as if with social classes) of culture and culture consumption.
- CANON(S). Definition: a rule or body of rules or principles generally established as valid and fundamental in a field or art or philosophy. Cultural



studies have challenged the notion of canonic understanding of culture, while reinforcing and questioning the very idea of the canon.

- Diverse case study: internet, comic books, pop music and videos, magazines, television (soap-operas, sit-coms)...