

Cultural Studies Goes Global

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Abstract: *Where does Cultural Studies stand now? Essentially, this is the question this essay is raising. The answer points, first, to the ‘cultural turn’ that has been transforming the humanities since the late 1980s, across the English-speaking world and beyond. While both the shift itself and the paradigm it brought about are sometimes plagued by fuzzy concepts and ill-defined methodology, the change is undeniable, and so are its benefits despite the controversies still swirling around Cultural Studies’ basic tenets, analytic protocols, and politics. Second, this intervention argues that cultural studies is now going global, namely, it is reinventing itself geopolitically in dialogue with comparative studies. In the process, this heterogeneous and fertile field pushes us to rethink the meaning of ‘culture,’ ‘tradition,’ ‘history,’ and ‘discourse.’*

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1. What the Fuss Is All About

I think Rita Felski is right: “[C]ultural Studies” has overtaken “postmodernism” as one of the most misused words in contemporary intellectual life. In the recent tidal wave of epigraphs, elegies, and jeremiads on what’s happening to the humanities, Cultural Studies has a starring role as chief villain and scapegoat.’ And she goes on to remind us that ‘only a few years ago, Cultural Studies was an obscure field that few American scholars knew or cared about. Now, it seems, everyone knows about Cultural Studies. But what exactly is it that they know?’ (28) According to Felski herself, ‘Scholars [W]ho Disdain Cultural Studies Don’t Know What They [A]re Talking About,’ to quote the title of an article she published back in 1999 (41). So, it appears, two things have happened since the ‘cultural turn’ in the humanities took place in the late 1980s.

The turn itself is the first. As a result, the field or, field conglomerate known as Cultural Studies is no longer peripheral in the academy. Needless to say, this is just stating the obvious. Even in English departments where cultural theorists and critics are not running the academic show (and more often than not they do not), what they do has definitely acquired an enviable aura, a panache; it has become cool. And because cool is a rare commodity on campuses, people – both colleagues and students – stopped and took notice. Otherwise, generally speaking, the more research-intensive the university,

the more prominent the role played there by Cultural Studies, and, indeed, in the United States and elsewhere, Cultural Studies remains by all accounts an academic affair despite cultural critics' efforts to break down the barriers between academia and culture at large.

At the same time, Cultural Studies' rise to (relative) prominence has failed to clarify the paradigm, which is probably as ill-defined as it was twenty years ago. It is in this sense that people have come to know 'about' it, perhaps tolerate it in their institutional units, in their colleagues' research projects and annual reports, and in curricula, but not quite know what the fuss is all about. In fact, some have argued that the 'thing' cannot be known at all – hence it cannot produce knowledge either – for it does not have a clearly marked object, methodology, or a terminology of its own. In other words, it is not a field or discipline *per se*, and because of that the structure of most universities, departments, and programs has not been able to fully accommodate it. A big headache for administrations from day one, Cultural Studies triggered off a turf war among faculty as soon as it became clear that the same (and not-quite-so-old) English and Literature departments were expected to play host to the 'thing.'

Still ongoing in this disciplinary space historically organized by scholars' multiple investment in the study of literature, the dispute is not unlike the (by now) old postmodern controversy, with the 'anti-promo' crowd claiming either that postmodernism is kitschy, nonsense, incoherent, illegitimate or that, whatever it is, there is nothing new ('post') about it since it is all already there, in *Finnegans Wake*, in romantic irony, in Cervantes's intertextual and metafictional ploys, in Petronius, if not somewhere even farther down the line. In this particular case, the bone of contention was and still is *culture & politics*, with *history* waiting offstage its turn in the 'Old' versus 'New' Historicism high drama. Similarly, some say that 'literary' studies, formalism included, has never been formalistic, and we do know, for example, that the Russian and Czech formalists were interested in culture and politics, which explains why Michael Bérubé looks to Jan Mukarovsky's quasi-ignored 1936 book *Aesthetic Function, Norm, and Value as Social Facts* (rather than to the Birmingham School classics) in his introduction to *The Aesthetics of Cultural Studies* to argue this very point (10-16).³ And vice versa: others still think that neither culture, what with all its subcultural and class-obsessed complications, nor politics is our true business. What they mean is, truth be told, solely politics and a certain kind of politics to boot, as if declaring oneself apolitical (on 'aesthetic' grounds) would not entail a political decision, taking up a position (and usually benefitting from it).

Worse than anything else is the ideological charge. Political controversy is often tolerated especially if it unfolds within limits (and thus proves ultimately harmless). But as soon as Cultural Studies crosses those limits, the critics who still deem the debate worth their while pull out what I would call an 'ideological.' They offer up something like this: the cultural critic – a cultural *theorist*, more exactly, because the case against Cultural Studies is just another case against theory – the cultural theorist, then, is an ideologue, has had an axe to grind all along, an unacknowledged (or all-too-acknowledged) agenda. And because this agenda is political, the treatment of this or that literary text is (must be) ideological. The 'analysis' is bound to adjudicate the poem or the novel sooner or later on behalf of some kind of social critique either on the 'subversive' or the

‘compliant’ side if not on both, as it happens quite often in the more Foucauldian cases – naturally, when literature is still the subject at hand. As we all ‘know,’ the cultural critic would much rather spend his or her time perusing cereal boxes, as Don DeLillo quips in *White Noise*, and even then he or she would do it to ‘theorize’ the whole experience, that is, to contrive some sort of connection between the ‘trivial’ material and the hole in the ozone layer or some such. For this sort of critic is no honest, ‘disinterested’ reader. He or she is a theorist. In fact, wait a minute: this theorist *n’est pas une* either, but a militant, a proselyte, a cereal-box carrying activist. The masquerade, the fraud must end here.

2. Culture and Relation

But it never does. That is not only because everything ultimately comes down to creating a persona for yourself whenever you say whatever you do, because the line between unavoidable posture and imposture is a fine one, but also because all we do, whether we admit to it or not, occurs on the edge of things, on their limits and in-between them, and so we never stand still but shuttle back and forth between things, domains of reality, cultural zones, and more broadly facets of being. What I like about Cultural Studies is that it has assumed, not always in so many words, the very condition of what it means to work in and with culture, with a Beckett play as much as with a rap video: it has owned up to its own provisionality, to its tentativeness, necessary motility, and heterogeneity. Applying itself to a realistic, pluralistic, democratic, multi-centric, and evolving notion of culture, it had to stay the same, and this was a political and ethical decision Stuart Hall, unlike F. R. Leavis, had not problems making. Indeed, for the cultural critic culture is anything but organic, linear, elitist, or exclusive. In this regard, today’s Leavisites and Hall live, theoretically speaking, in distinct British cultures, and, I might add, so do, in Romania and its distinct (and actually quite divergent) cultures, old-school critics such as Nicolae Manolescu, on one side, and the new generation of scholars coming into its own over the past decade, on the other side. Their opposing approaches reflect the contrast: on the one hand, a ‘smooth’ aesthetic method, self-enclosed, confident in its fiefdom, privileges, terminology, tools, and, in some cases, Cold-War and even pre-World War II credentials; on the other, a ‘fuzzy’ *modus operandi*, fraught with contradictions, unstable, self-examining, interested in ‘context,’ drawn to political and geopolitical reasoning, jump-starting itself over and over again following each new identity crisis or hastily printed obituary. It is a life in the fast lane and in several lanes at once, in that space where all threatens to become a blur unless the cultural theorist does his or her part and draws out the barely noticeable, the contours and the structure of the cultural field, connects the dots, traces the echoes and the implications, the homologies, the alliances and the complicities among objects, symbols, and meanings on a terrain in which anything hardly ever ends or stops signifying where it seems. It is my experience from reading others and from trying my hand at this kind of work myself that a good critic negotiates effectively a strategic position between the notion that a rose is a rose and that a rose is more than itself, *i.e.*, that its self is part and parcel of a greater ensemble inside, outside, and across the nation-state and therefore it

means and does more than what flowers normally do. In fact, *because* we are on aesthetic and cultural ground here, I tend to place myself somewhere closer to the latter extreme. After all, it is symbolic objects, artifacts, cultural discourse broadly that usually say and are more, resonate and launch a connection, an implication farther than other manifestations of our humanness.

What I am talking about again and again here is a suspicion of relatedness, that is to say, a suspicion of culture, a certain way of representing and dealing with it. In keeping with our age – with Nathalie Sarraute’s famous ‘suspicion era’ –, Cultural Studies has always been a philosophy and a methodology of suspicion, and that suspicion, in turn, refers to a representation of culture as relation, within and without said culture. To suspect something is to suspect a relation, a relevance of the object, metaphor, diction, narrative device, or style outside itself, to other objects and styles, aesthetic and otherwise. To be in culture, to acquire a cultural identity as a producer, product, or consumer (reader, viewer, listener, etc.), then to examine that identity imply teasing out the relations that identity is made of and the networks it is plugged into, to ask, in other words, what other materials, discourses, and significations it is derived from and what other similar texts, meanings, and arrangements it is likely to lead us to, across other social, ethnic, and national zones, discursive spaces, interests, and investments. This is what interpretation means in Cultural Studies: an inquiry always ‘beside itself,’ routinely ending up elsewhere: it begins with the cereal box and winds up in the ozone layer hole. It starts out with a reading of a novel or movie and closes with considerations about the U. S. administration’s foreign policy (or about Romanian former President Bănescu’s colorful language for that matter) ever back and forth, ‘cruising’ in the interstices of culture and society, bringing together the seemingly apart and discrete, stepping on everybody’s toes and turfs, messing things up, in brief, uncovering relations and interfaces where they have been rendered invisible by habit and complacency or telling people what these relations and interfaces actually *do* when we happen to be aware of their existence.

3. After Tradition: Cultural Studies and the Geopolitical

Reflecting the increasingly marked all-pervasiveness of things like relation, connection, linkage, and web across a range of forms, media, spaces, and degrees of materiality from the more canonical to the virtual, Cultural Studies is now going global—it is reinventing itself geopolitically. It is not only that in Manuel Castells’s network society Cultural Studies’ time has finally come and the abuse taken from the nonplused and ill-informed is at last paying off. What we need to be thinking about is the kind of challenge this type of society and its culture, or cultures, present us with.

As Charles Taylor has pointed out, ‘one cannot be a self on one’s own. I am a self only in relation to certain interlocutors. . . . A self exists only within what I call ‘webs of interlocution.’ (Taylor 36) No doubt, this has always been the case. But, witnessing ‘the disappearance of the outside’ (Andrei Codrescu), the age of ‘webs’ is imparting unprecedented urgency to this truth. More than ever before, the self finds itself, to quote

Bakhtin, ‘in a world of others’ words.’ (Bakhtin 143) It grows, tells the story of this growth – defines itself – in relation to an other and his or her own relations or stories. A conspicuously shrinking world – the world of David Harvey’s ‘space-time compression’ – is bringing this other closer and closer to the self, into a place and history now increasingly disputed if not shared. This is, as Derrida notes in a commentary on Édouard Glissant’s *Poétique de la relation*, the ontological and cultural ‘space of relation,’ of relation as both tie and narration (Derrida 19). It is a vibrant landscape – and a temporality – in which the self makes himself into what he or she is, of necessity, by *relating*, by setting up a connection with an other who remains distinct by birthplace, language, race, ethnic background, faith – by culture broadly.

Concurrently, in his or her very distinctiveness, by what sets him or her apart, this other provides the self with a crucial *self-fashioning* opportunity: an occasion to be with an other – simply, an occasion of being, a moment of fundamentally nurturing togetherness. For it is in this difference-loaded proximity, in relation to an other and his or her ‘relations’ that I relate (narrate) my own relations (stories) and thus, as philosophers from Jerome Bruner to Alasdair MacIntyre tell us, I evolve an identity. Visualizing the world as geography of connectedness, today’s cultural critics intimate that this identity is a relational upshot, coalesce in a conversational give-and-take across boundaries as we encounter others and their narratives, values, and ways of doing things. Insofar as it forms in this dialogue, then, my sense of identity, how I view myself and my kind, is to a notable degree ‘on loan,’ a gift from elsewhere, of an *other* presence.

What changes completely under these circumstances is the meanings and spaces of culture and tradition. Historically, cultural analysis has operated inside nations and national traditions, within precisely defined locations. In the transnational era, it has to go transnational and do vigorous, competent comparative work across traditions, where the plural and the hybrid must be emphasized. As a necessarily interdisciplinary endeavor, it has met with a modicum of success. Now it has no choice but cross the border and do, if in another spirit, that which globalization has been doing for about the same time (albeit in ways not always uncontroversial): connect the dots, look for ramifications, for the political bearings of things literary and the mythological (Barthes) upshots of things political in a much wider area, virtually worldwide. The perimeter of the nation no longer suffices to explicate a cultural product simply because the product and the national are no longer joined at the hip as they used to be. ‘Made in Germany’ is a thing of the past (and ‘Made in Europe,’ the slogan’s successor by default, is about to join it). This does not mean German products are not being ‘made’ anymore, for they are, or that ‘Germanness’ is no longer produced and reproduced in the commodities themselves; it is, but in South Africa, China, or the U. S., and from there it is imported back into Germany with so many ultimate driving machines. An off-shored, outsourced Germany is colonizing the German metropolis itself with Asian-wrought symbols of German engineering and clockwork efficiency. The same goes for culture or, I should say, cultures in a classical sense: they continue to flourish but have been loosened from their ancestral land. Nor are they able to contain cultural dynamic – production, consumption, commingling – within their historical frontiers. This dynamic is not as

‘situated’ as it used to be, nor is politics. Neither is yoked to traditional sites. Either can happen, and it actually does, in conjunction with other sites distributed pretty much around on the planet, and as it happens it rubs up against new localities, their traditions, styles, and tensions. This is Roland Robertson’s ‘glocalization,’ the broadest framework for today’s Cultural Studies, which thus must take into account the notion that the meaning and the political significance of a poem or cartoon can no longer be assessed fully within national boundaries when these are becoming more porous than ever, when you can access and ‘click’ on virtually anything.

I asked earlier where culture and meaning ended, and I must raise the question again in this context because what we need to figure out first when we set out to do Cultural Studies these days is the cultural space itself, where culture *is* or if it can still be physically located as it has been in the post-Westphalian era. And we may well discover that alongside culture, older, modernist notions of space, time, tradition, value (including aesthetic value), heritage, and influence are not of much help when a movie with an international cast, drawing on early medieval, Western mythology, spoken in English, shot in New Zealand, digitally mastered in Bombay, distributed by Hollywood worldwide instantly conveys something – apparently a lot – to hundreds of millions around the globe, who ‘relate’ their own mythologies and fantasies to the film’s as if it has been made in their backyard. This sort of aesthetic object and others like it – a Lars von Trier movie, a Cărtărescu novel, a Dutch high-couture item – are increasingly indicative of the kind of culture we live in as well as of the challenges Cultural Studies is facing today.

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