

## 3.9 Cultural Studies

**Rainer Winter**

1	The cultural studies project	118
2	Scientific and historical background	118
3	Basic propositions of cultural studies analysis	119
4	An example for qualitative research: the analysis of the 'popular'	120
5	New trends and perspectives	121
6	The significance of cultural studies for qualitative research	121

### 1 THE CULTURAL STUDIES PROJECT

Cultural studies is an interdisciplinary project which uses qualitative methods to subject the cultural forms, practices and processes of contemporary societies to critical investigation and analysis. There is not a single version of cultural studies; different variants have come about in a range of academic disciplines, in different countries at different times. Although the various context-specific expressions of the project make it difficult to define cultural studies in a precise and uniform way, it is possible to identify in its history a number of common questions, a specific approach to social reality and an intellectual centre. At the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) this concept was first used in the 1960s, and the characteristic features of theoretical and empirical research were developed that are today still definitive for the project all over the world. The 'invention' of cultural studies depends on the recognition that culture is of central importance in the present day and that it can only be appropriately analysed in the context of power and politics. The stimuli for research projects are often, therefore, social and political problems or questions. The methodological procedure of cultural studies can best be described as 'do-it-yourself'. For a particular research project theories and

methods are selected, combined and applied from a range of fields of science according to pragmatic and strategic points of view. If the research question so requires, new theories and methods are 'put together' or developed from what is available (see 2.4).

Cultural studies relates not only to such different theories as culturalist or (post)-structuralist approaches. Even in the methods there is a great diversity, ranging from semiotic text analysis to participant observation (see 5.5), narrative interview (see 5.2) and focus groups (see 5.4). In this, as Stuart Hall – for many years director of the CCCS – claims, cultural studies always seeks 'to enable people to understand what [was] going on, and especially to provide ways of thinking, strategies for survival, and resources for assistance' (Hall 1990: 22).

### 2 SCIENTIFIC AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The CCCS was founded in 1964 by the literary scholar Richard Hoggart. His aim, building on the synthesis of literary-critical and sociological approaches, was to analyse popular culture. The stimulus for this orientation was provided by a number of different publications and ensuing debates within the British New Left after the

end of the 1950s. Hoggart himself, in his book *The Uses of Literacy*, which appeared in 1957, analysed the influence of social change, particularly the negative influence of commercial mass culture, on working class cultures in his exhaustive descriptions of their daily practices and cultural forms. Raymond Williams, in his book *Culture and Society 1780–1950*, which appeared the following year (Williams 1958), provided a full discussion of English literature and literary criticism from the eighteenth century on, and identified, compared and systematized the different meanings of the word 'culture'. On the one hand reactions to and criticisms of modernity intensified under this label, and on the other hand a holistic concept of culture in the English context was developed which views it as a 'whole way of life'. Culture is not defined as an area shut off from everyday life but 'as ordinary'. In his critique of Williams, the historian Edward P. Thompson (1961) stressed the importance of noting that in every 'complete way of life' there are contradictions, social conflicts and disagreements. In *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), he demonstrated that the working class had taken an active part in the cultural process of their own origins.

These were the starting points for the work in Birmingham, which may initially be described as a search movement. Particularly under the leadership of Stuart Hall, questions of sociology and cultural theory were of central importance. In a move away from the structural functionalism and its integrationist concept of culture that was dominant at the time, the members of the CCCS were concerned with alternative theories which themselves were intensively concerned with the productive role of culture. For example, the German tradition of cultural sociology (M. Weber, G. Simmel), with its interpretative approach to social reality, symbolic interactionism (H. Becker, see 3.3), sociology of knowledge (P. L. Berger and T. Luckmann) and French structuralism (R. Barthes, C. Lévi-Strauss, L. Althusser) all helped to provide the resources to push ahead the cultural studies project. Looking back at this time, Hall pointed out that cultural studies in Birmingham developed in the interface and debate between the culturalist and the structuralist paradigms: 'Whereas, in "culturalism" experience was the ground – the terrain of the "lived" – where consciousness and conditions intersected, structuralism insisted that

"experience" could not, by definition, be the ground of anything, since one could only "live" and experience one's conditions in and through the categories, classifications and frameworks of the culture' (Hall 1996e: 41).

Finally, an intensive preoccupation with Gramsci's hegemony theory (1991), and subsequently with Foucault's analysis of power (1978), led to culture being defined as a field of social inequality where battles and struggles for power are played out.

Against this theoretical background, a variety of research projects was carried out, proceeding from social problem situations (such as the erosion of the working class, the spread of a consumer lifestyle) and present-day questions (such as media definitions of social disagreements and problems). The studies of youth sub-cultures (Hall and Jefferson 1976; Hebdige 1979; Willis 1977, see 2.4) and on the analysis and reception of media (Hall 1980; Morley 1980) have become very well known. Since the 1980s, as a result of the activities of students and migrants, there has been a process of international growth in cultural studies, which was pursued first in Australia, Canada and the United States, but today on a world-wide scale.

### 3 BASIC PROPOSITIONS OF CULTURAL STUDIES ANALYSIS

The difficulty of defining cultural studies should not lead to a situation where every analysis of culture, in particular popular culture, is equated with cultural studies. For example, a semiotic analysis of a Hollywood film or the ethnographic investigation of cultural worlds with no mention of the relation between culture and power do not belong to cultural studies. Cultural studies has as its goal the investigation of cultural processes in their contextual link to power relations. The determining and characteristic influence of these on cultural practices has to be established. For this purpose, in the tradition of Williams, a comprehensive concept of culture is employed which includes both cultural texts and experience and practices. The traditional distinction between high and popular culture is itself understood as an expression of social power relationships. The true object of cultural studies does not consist, therefore, of discrete cultural forms observed in isolation

from their social or political context. On the contrary, proceeding from concrete questions, cultural processes in their varying forms are analysed in contexts limited in space and time. As Lawrence Grossberg (1995: 13) writes, a hallmark of cultural studies is a radical contextualism: 'To put it succinctly, for cultural studies, context is everything and everything is contextual.' For this context is not merely a framework that influences and determines social practices that take place within its borders. It is rather that the practices and identities first constitute the context within which they are practices and identities. For analysis this means that 'understanding a practice involves theoretically and historically (re-)constructing its context' (Grossberg 1992: 55). Theory and context, in the framework of cultural studies, therefore condition each other reciprocally: any knowledge gained is always context-specific, and in this contexts are never fully represented but can only be constructed under differing perspectives. It is the goal of cultural studies to understand economic processes better, using whatever theoretical resources and empirical investigations are available, and then, as a second step, to contribute to a change in their contexts. This implies setting up symbolic disagreements, the struggle for meanings and forms of 'resistance', and making 'knowledge' available so that participants can understand these processes better.

Cultures, for cultural studies, only exist in the plural. In contrast to monolithic and essentialist notions of culture it emphasizes the multiplicity of cultures and values that are determined in the course of ongoing changes in contemporary societies – cultures of class, gender, ethnic groups, sexual and political subcultures, fringe cultures, special cultures transmitted by the media. Against the background of the de-traditionalizing and dissolution of stable identities, cultural studies proposes that culture is a battle for meanings, a never-ending conflict about the sense and value of cultural traditions, practices and experiences. Particularly in ethnographic studies, it shows that alongside the dominant ideas of mainstream culture created by the culture industries there are also 'deviant', residual and emergent ideas and values (Williams 1977). Here one of the central insights is that one cannot determine, on the basis of the most erudite and refined interpretation of a cultural text, ideology or discourse, how the cultural forms will *actually* be interpreted, used or

learned in the everyday world by different persons and social groups. In the reception and learning of symbols and media, in the making of styles of self-presentation out of pre-existing resources, or in the efforts to create and maintain a resilient identity in institutions, cultural studies demonstrates the creativity and productivity of cultural processes. This art of obstinacy, which is displayed in everyday contexts, may be interpreted as a critique of power (Winter 2001). This has been very clearly elaborated by John Fiske.

#### 4 AN EXAMPLE FOR QUALITATIVE RESEARCH: THE ANALYSIS OF THE 'POPULAR'

In his analyses of the popular in the present day, Fiske follows closely Foucault's (1978) distinction between power and resistance. In specific historical situations 'resistance' can arise in the relation of discursive structures, cultural practice and subjective experiences. Fiske understands the everyday as a continual struggle between the strategies of the 'strong' and the guerrilla tactics of the 'weak' (cf. 1989: 32–47). In using the 'resources' that the system makes available in the form of media texts and other consumer objects, everyday actors try to define their own living conditions and to express their own interests. Fiske is not interested in the processes of learning that contribute to social reproduction, but in the secret and hidden consumption that is, in the sense of Michel de Certeau (1984), a fabrication, a product of meanings and pleasures, in which consumers become more aware of their own circumstances, and which can (perhaps) make a contribution to gradual cultural and social transformation (Fiske 1993).

In his analyses Fiske deconstructs in a clear-sighted and original way a wide variety of popular texts, ranging from Madonna to 'Die Hard' to 'Married with Children' with the aim of showing their range of meaning potential, which is differently received and transformed by onlookers according to their own social and historical situation. He demonstrates the inconsistencies, the vagueness, the contradictory structure or the polyphony of media texts, and shows from this how closely popular texts relate to social reality and articulate social differences. The reception and the learning of texts becomes a

contextually anchored social practice in which texts are not predetermined as objects but are produced on the basis of social experience. In this way Fiske shows the uniqueness and significance of cultural practices which are realized in a particular place and at a particular time. He sees culture, which he understands as a 'whole way of life', as practice, as a series of sense-patterns and meanings that change and compete with each other and which are in conflict: 'I understand culture, then, to encompass the struggle to control and contribute to the social circulation and uses of meanings, knowledges, pleasures and values. Culture always has both sense-making and power-bearing functions' (Fiske 1993: 13).

## 5 NEW TRENDS AND PERSPECTIVES

Apart from Fiske's work, the tradition of cultural studies offers a wealth of qualitative studies investigating the processes of reception and learning in everyday life, not forgetting the power relations that shape them. David Morley (1980), in a trend-setting investigation, was the first to show how complex the reactions to media texts can be. They are dependent on the interplay of social, cultural and discursive positions (such as class, ethnic affinity, age or gender) which point to the unequal distribution of power in society and in the cultural coding of texts. This was followed by a large number of ethnographically oriented studies of everyday contexts of media reception (Nightingale 1996). For instance, Mary E. Brown (1994) discovered, in an ethnographic study of conversations between women on the subject of soap operas, that the series are used to express critical attitudes towards the dominance exercised by men. Even though most of these series are designed from a masculine perspective, this is used subversively by women in their conversations, for example, when they laugh together about the behaviour of men in the series. Talking about soap operas becomes a rebellious pleasure. This was supplemented by studies of 'fans', which showed that they use media products in a productive and creative way and that they read them 'against the grain' (Winter 1995).

The context that has become topical in many more recent projects in cultural studies is, on the one hand, globalization, involving Western consumer goods and media texts (cf. Morley 1991),

and on the other hand the migration of ethnic groups. One central question is the related transformation of cultural identities and the fashioning of new forms of ethnicity (Hall 1992). A first ethnographically based investigation of this context was carried out by Marie Gillespie (1995). She shows how television and video are used as communicative resources by families from the Punjab (Hindus and Sikhs) and by young people in Southall in West London, to negotiate new identities in the diaspora. Taking the example of Coca-Cola advertisements and the way young people address them locally, Gillespie (1995: 191–197) is able to show that a transnational product can open up an imaginary space in which one's own culture can be redefined: 'media are being used by productive consumers to maintain and strengthen boundaries, but also to create new, shared spaces in which syncretic cultural forms, such as "new ethnicities", can emerge' (Gillespie 1995: 208).

In reaction to the growing criticism of their intensive preoccupation with the 'consumption' of media texts, that have led to an accusation of 'cultural populism', the adherents of cultural studies have devoted more attention to investigating the processes of 'production', for example, to the analysis of its cultural dimension (Du Gay 1997; McRobbie 1998), or to the production of 'media events' (Fiske 1994b). To be able to analyse a cultural text or an artefact appropriately, the cultural processes of representation, production, consumption and regulation should be investigated together (Du Gay et al. 1997). Only in this way can the 'circuit of culture' be understood and, from this, the central role of culture in the postmodern period.

## 6 THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CULTURAL STUDIES FOR QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Cultural studies is distinguished by the qualitative analysis of cultural processes in a range of social contexts that are marked by power relations, change and conflict. Both in its youth studies and its media research it has been innovative in resisting the dominance of quantitative procedures and developing new theoretical and methodological alternatives. For example, its original linking of semiotic text analysis with ethnographic reception analysis was taken up in other research traditions, such as the 'benefits-and-gratifications approach' (= 'Nutzen- und

*Belohnungsansatz'*), with its communication science orientation (Liebes and Katz 1990). Cultural studies carries out qualitative research within the framework of comprehensive analyses of culture and society. Its strength is therefore in the production of connections that transcend the locations of individual experiences, and this demonstrates that culture is 'a whole way of life' in the sense of Williams (cf. Fiske 1994a). Its theories and methods, and also its questions, are not universally valid or constant: they are developed, rather, in response to the social problems and questions of specific contexts.

With all the required pragmatism and eclecticism of methodological procedure which make it clear that qualitative social research is bricolage (Denzin and Lincoln 1994a), it would also be sensible for cultural studies to develop criteria for the evaluation and analysis of its own work, in terms of both its data collection and 'the art and politics of interpretation' (Denzin 1993; see 2.7, 3.3, 5.21). Of course, it would not be sensible to borrow and apply positivist and post-positivist criteria (see 4.7), as critics have tried to do (Ferguson and Golding 1997), since

cultural studies has a constructivist orientation, (see 3.4) in the creation of contexts, and a critical orientation, in its analysis of power relationships. Its critical constructivism is capable of giving a further innovative impulse to qualitative research. A distinct emphasis on the constructivist character of the research process and, in particular, of the role of the researcher may also highlight and augment the reflexivity and interpretative character of both cultural studies and qualitative research.

#### FURTHER READING

---

Denzin, N. K. (ed.) (1996) *Cultural Studies. A Research Volume*. Greenwich, CT: JAI Press (has appeared annually since 1996).

Du Gay, P., Hall, S., Mackay, H. and Negus, K. (1997) *Doing Cultural Studies. The Story of the Sony Walkman*. London: Sage.

Storey, J. (Ed.) (1996) *What is Cultural Studies? A Reader*. London: Arnold.