BEYOND THE DISCIPLINES:  
Cultural Studies

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Today’s Symposium looks in one way like an invitation to a younger generation to display its wares, with perhaps a suggestion that the bright new ones are being displayed as an alternative to the old and somewhat tarnished ones. At the same time, however, it would seem that the wares are being displayed as a range of alternatives to each other, since it is likely that in these times of economic and spiritual recession the discriminating buyer will not be able to afford the job lot. This is to say that the structure of the Symposium implies a degree of arbitrariness, as though the new wares were distinguished from the old only by their novelty, their fashion value. I want to argue that this is not the case: that there is a logic to the development of new disciplinary structures such as Cultural Studies out of the old ones, and that what we are concerned with here is the normal process of formation and reformation of the discipline of literary studies in response to real intellectual and social pressures: not with the scattering of a coherent discipline into incoherence.

At the same time, it needs to be said that this logic of transformation is one that has been manifested in a long and severe disciplinary crisis; and that the intellectual structures which are emerging have not produced a fully developed alternative to the previous paradigm. My intention is not to proclaim the advent of Cultural Studies as a self-contained discipline with a comprehensive alternative research programme. I have no desire to proclaim a new orthodoxy, although there is certainly a danger that Cultural Studies could soon become one; nor do I believe that it in some way transcends disciplinary boundaries, although it is certainly marked by its openness to other disciplinary structures.

I shall start by sketching the dimensions of the crisis in literary studies, and shall then talk of Cultural Studies as a set of potential solutions to some of the intractable problems faced by literary studies. But Cultural Studies itself, of course, opens up new sets of theoretical and methodological difficulties, as well as crucial problems of disciplinary location, and it is these problems and these uncertainties that I shall want to stress, rather than the triumph of an achieved knowledge.

The topos of “the crisis in English studies” is one of the great banalities of contemporary theory, and I should say that I myself have never
experienced the interesting times we live in as something deeply disturbing. On the contrary, I am one of those who have been doing the pushing, ever since my undergraduate disillusionment with the wares offered me in the ANU’s English Department. It has been the conviction that things could be, at the very least, a good deal more interesting, more intellectually stimulating, and indeed that the methodological shoddiness of the discipline of English demanded a radical upgrading of its conceptual framework, that has motivated me to exacerbate the so-called crisis to the very best of my abilities. In an article I published a couple of years ago I wrote:

The discipline of English in Australia, which is now little more than a century old, was formed in a context of political and cultural colonialism, and of the teaching of a high culture which was specifically that of the English ruling class. It has, from its mid-nineteenth century inception, made large claims both to ethical superiority and to a disinterested neutrality in relation to social struggles. It has claimed to be a critical discipline, but its critique has often been of a purely spiritual order. It has until recently been blind to the ways in which the high culture it disseminates has worked as an instrument of class legitimation. Until recently it has systematically slighted - with certain honorary exceptions - the work of women and of non-European writers, and indeed has hardly noticed the paradox of the self-disqualification this entails. Despite its close connection with the secondary schooling system it has rarely taken seriously the realities of its roles as a moral pedagogy and in the training of students in functional literacy - indeed, it has been associated with a rigidly normative teaching of language skills which may explain much of the unfortunate revulsion against grammatical training in the schools.¹

And I went on to express my pleasure that the discipline, in this form, has been falling apart for some time now.

Let me try to give a brief account of that logic of transformation that I spoke of by detailing four interlocking areas of crisis in literary studies.

The first of these concerns a growing uncertainty about the theoretical object of literary studies. For a number of reasons, some of them political and institutional, others epistemological and methodological, it has become increasingly difficult to accept that the objects to which we pay attention - a

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set of canonical texts, or something called literature - are somehow unproblematically there, and that our task is that of reading off meanings which are firmly anchored in these pre-given objects. It is fundamental to the epistemologies of the more sophisticated of the natural sciences that a discipline's object of study is a constructed theoretical object. Within the literary disciplines such an awareness has come only as the result of a process of political contestation - as a result, for example, of the critique by feminists of the exclusionary formation of the canon, or by Marxists of the neglect of the network of historical relations within which texts are produced and circulated.

The effect of this disturbing of the self-evidence of the object is that there is no longer a general agreement about what this object is (is it "the text", and if so which ones? is it literariness, or textuality, or a historical literary system?); and even the simplest form of object - let's call it the text - has to be seen as being constituted in at least four dimensions: that of a set of historical relations of literary production; that of a complex network of intertextual relations, extending into an indefinite future as well as into the past; that of the sets of uses which are made of texts by their readers; and that of a particular institutional context which endows the text with its value and constitutes it as worthy of a particular kind of attention.

The second way in which the centre no longer holds I shall call a crisis of universality. Again, this involves a process of political contestation: in this case, of the always unspoken assumption that the practitioner of literary studies by definition - and regardless of what gender or race or class they might actually be - is white, male, middle-class, and English.

The Englishness of English studies was always something of a problem in Australia, although most English departments did a staunch job of ignoring the problem until about twenty years ago. The recognition of a reading and judging subject who is differentiated by national culture was perhaps the easiest step to take, but also a crucial preparatory step. The recognition that there are readers who are not male, or not white, or not middle-class, and indeed possibly some combination of all of these, has been considerably more painful and has provoked considerably more resistance, because what is at stake is not simply an acknowledgement of the diversity of human experience, but a recognition of structures of value which might be radically incompatible and indeed antagonistic. The threat, let us say, is to the universality of human reason; and the paradox is that in order to uphold the claim to universality, the defenders of this reason have had to refuse the particular reasons of those whose values appear to be non-universal.

The third area of crisis has to do with the decline in prestige and authority of literary studies, and indeed of the humanities in general, in relation to other disciplines and other discourses. Traditionally the struggle of the humanities has been with the discourses of the sciences; it may now be
the case, however, that our proper antagonist is that set of utilitarian discourses, from economics to competency evaluation, which have come to occupy a privileged place in our education system and in our polity. The corollary of the increased marginality of literary studies has been a loss of confidence in our ultimate goals. The increased complexity of theory, the endlessness of the process of critical revision, and the anti-systemic impetus of poststructuralist theory have fatally undermined our sense of the cumulative nature of knowledge and so of a common and continuous project in which local research would be integrated, sooner or later, into a coherent whole. This postmodern anxiety is of course not peculiar to the humanities; it has certainly become a fact of life in the natural sciences, and it may be that it is only the self-consciously useful disciplines which are largely untouched by it.

The final area of crisis, and one which is perhaps consequent upon the others, has to do with the criteria of valuation of literary texts. The texts on which we choose to work are of course always selected from a larger set, and traditionally they have been selected on the basis of some criterion of literary worth. Here too the self-evidence of these criteria has become deeply problematical, as political struggles over the canon have foregrounded the social underpinnings of valuation: that is, have made it clear that different social groups value different kinds of text, and that there is no non-political way of demonstrating that one set of criteria is more universally valid than any other.

Cultural Studies - to return at last to my starting point - takes its origin above all in this crisis of the universality of value. In particular, it has attempted to reclaim working-class and popular cultural forms as valid objects of study, and it has broadened its field of attention from literary texts to a wider notion of the cultural, in part as a way of arguing for the relevance of aesthetic forms other than the literary in contemporary popular culture. At the same time, it understands the concept of text in terms of socially organised textual practices, or the social relations of textuality.

Let me say, as a rough approximation, that Cultural Studies takes as its theoretical object the culture of everyday life, where the concept of culture is understood in a broadly anthropological sense, as the full range of practices and representations in which meanings and personal and group identities are formed. In this sense, Cultural Studies is concerned as much with the social relations of representation as it is with self-contained texts; it thinks of the cultural, in Williams' phrase, as a "way of life" rather than as a set of privileged objects. Accordingly, it tends to place its analytic emphasis on the social contexts of textuality, and especially upon the contexts of use. Thus a study of television soap operas or of bikie magazines might concentrate its attention upon the ways in which such texts are integrated into the daily culture of their audience or readership: the ways in which they allow a
certain resistance to routine, or make possible the formation of group identity around particular gendered fantasies. The crucial point about such work is that it seeks to avoid being normative, at least in the first instance. Rather than approaching its materials with a preconceived notion of their worth, and rather than judging them according to criteria which are valid for the high culture of the intelligentsia, it seeks to assess cultural texts and practices in terms of the criteria of their users; and in teaching such texts it assumes that students are already competent in their own culture and are able to talk knowledgeably about its codes. In this it is strikingly close to the basic premises of ethnomethodology, which similarly seeks to articulate the norms and codes of practice elaborated by ordinary social members, rather than to privilege the meta-descriptions elaborated by sociologists. Indeed, one of Garfinkel’s key phrases - the refusal to treat ordinary social members as “cultural dopes” - has been taken over directly by Stuart Hall (sometimes in the form “cultural dupes”) to indicate a similar refusal of patronisation in Cultural Studies.

All this, of course, raises substantial theoretical problems, and much of the energy of Cultural Studies has gone into attempting to develop its theoretical framework to a degree of complexity sufficient to come to terms with them. The concept of the everyday or the ordinary, for example, can itself become normative to the extent that it sets up a singular model of cultural practice, rather than accounting for the diversities of ordinariness in highly differentiated societies. The category of the ordinary is of course one which is constantly appealed to by the mass media as a way of legitimising their processes of audience formation, and there is always the danger for the cultural theorist of entering into a specular relationship to the object of analysis.

Similarly, a focus on the active uses made of cultural texts can beg the question of whose uses are being taken as exemplary, and even the laudable attempt to bracket the theoretically informed criteria of valuation of the analyst in favour of an ethnographic reconstruction of the value system of a particular group has the consequence that in some sense the analyst’s own values are being disavowed and are therefore partly uncontrolled. This may mean, to be more precise, that the values of the group - which are never anything more than an analytic construct - may act as a kind of alibi, a fiction into which the analyst’s own values are projected in a screened form; and this possibility raises that whole complex set of political issues to do with the proclivity of intellectuals to speak “on behalf of” those who lack a voice in cultural and social debate.

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A somewhat different set of problems has to do with the focus of much work in Cultural Studies on the mass media. The rationale for this focus is obvious: the mass media, and especially the electronic media, are by far the predominant form of cultural communication, apart from face-to-face talk, in the advanced societies. Here again, however, the difficulties of theorisation of the object of study are formidable, since apparently unitary phenomena such as "television" or "the print media" tend to dissolve as soon as they are posited, becoming little more than conceptual fictions. Similarly, the notions of a mass audience or a popular readership lose their solidity when they are subjected to analysis: "the mass" and "the popular" are heuristic devices with little sociological precision, and the concept of the audience is as volatile and as metaphysical as that of "the reader" in literary studies.

The concept of culture itself is notoriously imprecise, and is constantly problematic because of its tendency either to be set in subordinate opposition to some concept of the non-cultural domain ("society" or "social organisation", for example), and thus to appear epiphenomenal; or, conversely, to become so inclusive a concept that it loses all its explanatory force. For strategic reasons (that is, for reasons of self-protection), Cultural Studies is usually taken not to include the literary, and to be concerned with contemporary everyday culture rather than that of other periods. The rationale for these strategic choices will eventually become less cogent, and the field of Cultural Studies may then move into many of the areas covered by traditional literature departments - although certainly with rather different kinds of interest and rather different methodologies. This too will pose difficult problems of disciplinary identity.

Much interesting work has of course been done in spite of these theoretical difficulties, and Cultural Studies seems to me to be one of the more interesting and dynamic areas of work in the humanities. I think for example of the British studies of youth subcultures or of the cultural politics of race; of work in the United States on the discursive construction of AIDS; of analyses of the gendered culture of the workplace; of readings of complex cultural sites - a motel, a pleasure beach, a shopping mall, a theme park; I think of studies of the class-differentiated reception of television programmes, or of the uses to which children put the plots of the television shows they watch; or of work on the secret languages or argots of social subgroups. The very diversity of this research means that of necessity it often touches the edges of other disciplines; work in Cultural Studies often looks like work done in micro-sociology, in discourse analysis or conversation analysis, in semiotics, in legal studies, in social history or in social anthropology. It may be that this is simply not a problem, and that the looseness of disciplinary boundaries is an entirely productive state of affairs; or it may be that we would want to distinguish Cultural Studies by its focus on
questions of textuality and of the textual constitution of those states of affairs we call the real.

One important shift that seems to be becoming apparent, however, is a move away from sociology and sociological research-methods towards anthropology, and particularly towards a concern with the cultural dimensions of ethnicity. The Cultural Studies centre at the University of California, Santa Cruz, for example, which is run by James Clifford, seems to have developed quite independently of the “British” tradition which had its origins in the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham; its emphasis is more directly on an ethnographic understanding of culture, and specifically on questions of ethnic identity within highly differentiated contemporary societies. Andrew Ross has recently documented a similar shift as Cultural Studies “moves its traditional focus away from the conflict between dominant and popular cultures, conceived as unified blocs, and turns its attention to the axis between central and marginal cultures, conceived as pluralities”[3]. In both cases, it seems to me, what we are witnessing is a turn from Cultural Studies to Multicultural Studies: a turn which has profound implications for the future of work right across the spectrum of the humanities in Australia.

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Author/s: 
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Title: 
Beyond the disciplines: cultural studies

Date: 
1992

Citation: 

Publication Status: 
Published

Persistent Link: 
http://hdl.handle.net/11343/34285

File Description: 
Beyond the disciplines: cultural studies

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