How to Study Culture

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Where is culture? In order to examine something, we have to first locate it. So, where exactly do we have to look to get a grip on culture? As we saw before, culture is never present as such, not located at one specific place or moment, or inherent in one specific group; instead, culture is always subject to negotiation, always contested, always also elsewhere. We do have to start somewhere, though.

We can broadly distinguish between two ways in which culture has been studied prior to Cultural Studies, roughly falling into the two fields of study from which it took inspiration. The first is what one might call a view from 'above': representative artefacts and institutions are studied in art history, literary studies, musical studies, etc. Ethnology, cultural anthropology, cultural sociology and similar disciplines that look at everyday mentalities and general behavior, on the other hand, could be said to take a view from 'below'.

Cultural Studies combines both perspectives, creating ethnographic readings of capitalist societies. In this approach, culture does exist only in the form of *practices* that are linked to both *representations* and lived *experiences*. Every representation of culture shows it in a specific, selective way; it is never identical to a culture as a whole way of life. A whole way of life, on the other hand, only comes into existence *as a culture* in the process of (self-)reflection and through the recognition of difference: for this, it needs representations. Consequently, we find culture neither here nor there, but only in the processes of *negotiation*.

In this sense, Stuart Hall argues that culture "is not *a* practice" (art, for example, or festivities), but that it "is threaded through *all* social practices", whether they are considered to be economic, political, scientific or else. Culture (as in: meaning, norms, values) is "within or underlying all social practices". Hall infers from this definition of culture that the search for an object of study has come to an end: "The question of what, then, is studied, [...] resolves itself". [1] Culture is everywhere, and thus, potentially, we can start our investigation anywhere.

While this makes it somewhat easy to find a starting point for an analysis, it makes it all the more difficult to find an end. If culture is everywhere, and thus nowhere in particular, you would potentially have to study everything in order to come to a final conclusion. This is, of course, impossible. Consequently, as the prominent Cultural Studies scholar Lawrence Grossberg has highlighted, every attempt at studying culture "will at best be partial and incomplete"; "by traditional academic standards, it will always be a failure". [2] And this is not necessarily a bad thing: it can also take some pressure off you. *Fail again, fail better.*

In order to deal with such problems of beginning and ending research, Cultural Studies has suggested both a starting point for analysis, and an endpoint – and has left it somewhat open how far you will get on your way from the one to the other. As the smallest unit of investigation, Cultural Studies suggests *articulations*; the most extensive level of investigation is the *conjuncture*. We will look at these two heuristic notions more closely.

Conjuncture

Cultural Studies' definition of culture broke with traditional definitions in two important ways. First, as we saw previously, there was a move away "from older definitions of culture" as a "set of texts and artefacts" towards "an 'anthropological' definition of culture – as cultural *practices*". But Cultural Studies did not stop there. Following the first departure there came a second, a "move to a more historical definition of cultural practices: questioning the anthropological meaning and interrogating its universality". Although culture is seen as a constitutive feature of all human activity, it is at the same time seen as formed and structured by its specific historical conditions, its existence within particular social, legal, political and economic contexts. As a consequence, a *conjunctural analysis* is always "historically and contextually specific", [3] and its results cannot easily be transferred to other contexts and other times.

The term 'conjuncture' is the name for the specific historical conditions within which cultural practices take place. For example: "The post-war period, dominated by the welfare state, public ownership and wealth redistribution through taxation was one conjuncture; the neoliberal, market-forces era unleashed by Thatcher and Reagan was another". [4] However, these historical conditions are not simply given as a uniform whole. Instead, we can define a *conjuncture* "as the coming together of often distinct though related contradictions, moving according to

different tempos, but condensed in the same historical moment"[5], "a period during which the different social, political, economic and ideological contradictions that are at work in society come together to give it a specific and distinctive shape".[6]

It is important to note the *contradictory* and *discordant* nature of the conjuncture which produces some form of unity without erasing all differences. For the analysis of culture this means that we *do* know that our object of research is related to the conjuncture at large, but that we *cannot* know in advance how exactly this relation is realized:

> Conjunctural analysis carries the promise that we can avoid the temptations of theoretical reductionism: the belief that because we have the theory, we know what the world is like and how it works. It also offers the possibility of escaping from epochal thinking: the belief that because this is late capitalism, we know what time it is. However, the promise of conjunctural analysis also brings with it a price to be paid: the hard work of actually doing it.[7]

Articulation

Whereas the *conjuncture* marks the widest possible extension of a Cultural Studies analysis, *articulation*, the second concept that is suggested here to approach practical research, is of smaller scale. Articulations might be seen as that which holds the conjuncture together: through *power*. Articulations are linkages that connect specific meanings, things, persons and activities *as if* the *two* (or more) indeed were *one*: as if women were bound to do the housework, as if heterosexuality was indeed a natural fix, as if the unemployed were actually lazy. In more abstract terms, an articulation is "the form of the connection that *can* make a unity of two different elements, under certain conditions. It is a linkage which is not necessary, determined, absolute and essential for all time", but contingent on its historical conditions.[8]

> The concept of articulation – along with its companion terms, disarticulation and rearticulation – [...] provides a way of describing the continual severing, realignment, and recombination of discourses, social groups, political interests, and structures of power in a society.[9]

Today, for example, we find far-right political parties aligning themselves with an apparent pro-Israel stance – an articulation that would have been unthinkable only thirty years ago.

In its insistence on historical contingency, Cultural Studies underlines its critical position towards all forms of essentialism. However, Cultural Studies does not stop there, but asks instead: how can something hold nonetheless, at least for a certain time? "You have to ask, under what circumstances *can* a connection be forged or made?"[10] You have to ask, which are "the agents at work in producing concrete and specific articulations"?[11] An articulation is never a given thing, but a bond "which requires particular conditions of existence to appear at all, which has to be positively sustained by specific processes, which is not 'eternal' but has constantly to be renewed".[12] This means that articulations do not simply exist, but require hard work to persist, and a conjunctural analysis has to replicate this work to uncover the conditions of persistence. As John Clarke, who worked with Stuart Hall on several projects, emphasizes, this "understanding of articulation – combining both its contingency and the necessity of the work of production and maintenance – was a critical element in Hall's approach to cultural studies".[13]

What makes the concept especially productive for Cultural Studies is that articulation "was always used by Hall in a double sense – referring, on the one hand, to expressing or giving voice while, on the other, to making connections".[14] Or as Hall himself put it:

> In England, the term has a nice double meaning because
> 'articulate' means to utter, to speak forth, to be articulate. It
> carries that sense of language-ing, of expressing, etc. But we
> also speak of an 'articulated' lorry (truck): a lorry where the
> front (cab) and back (trailer) can, but need not necessarily, be
> connected to one another. The two parts are connected to
> each other, but through a specific linkage, that can be broken.
> [15]

The concept of 'articulation' in Cultural Studies highlights the role of representations in the forging of connections. "Nation, ethnic group, families, sexualities, etc.", Hall writes, "are arbitrary closures".[16] Such 'arbitrary closures' give a seeming stability to historically formed connections that are not inherent to them. Representations (among other means) have an important role to play in such closures; they join certain

elements of a culture in ways as to make them appear strongly, almost naturally connected.

Do articulations have to look the way they do? Are they *necessarily* formed the way they are? Is there no way they could be different? *No!* Is it pure coincidence, then, that they look the way they do? Is the connection completely _arbitrary_? Is it done without any interested parties involved? *No, again!* Articulations are *contingent*: not necessary, but neither arbitrary.

As a consequence of such contingency, there is no general rule of conjunction, no general rule of articulation. What comes together, and what not, "cannot be predicted before the fact". [17] We can only ask: what are the factors determining why a specific articulation has emerged in the way we find it now? Under which circumstances is an articulation being forged? Who has an interest in doing so? There is always someone (a political party, an agency, etc.) who is doing the articulation (speaking, organizing, connecting, etc.). Consequently, you have to ask, who or what has the *power* to articulate? Articulation is a *practice* done by humans, institutions and organizations with different capacities of agency, under conditions they might not know of, understand or control.

Of course, articulations never exist on their own, but are stitched into a web of other articulations, some with more, some with less stability. As a result, articulations support each other, keep each other in place and cannot be easily undone: "If you want to move [an articulation], to rearticulate it in another way, you are going to come across all the grooves that have articulated it already". [18] Contingent as they may be, articulations "have real effects" [19] when they are part of a wider network of articulations. Thus, a *conjuncture* is "made up of myriad *articulations* […] that make some things possible, others not". [20] Every articulation "empowers possibilities and disempowers others; legitimizes some identities and delegitimizes others; makes some things happen and other things not". [21] Articulations are productive, they constitute reality.

The aim of Cultural Studies research is to unfold how a specific articulation (or set of articulations) is formed und upheld – and to show how this is connected to the conjuncture at large. What interests Cultural Studies are the means and ways of creating relative stability in a world full of contradictions and antagonisms, as well as the possibility of producing re-articulations that challenge such apparent stability. Besides the

dominant forms of culture, we can always also find residual and emergent alternatives on which we can build. [22]

In order to understand (and change) the present conjuncture, we have to ask: "what are the circumstances in which we now find ourselves, how did they arise, what forces are sustaining them and what forces are available to us to change them?" [23] By thinking about how articulations hold together, both individually and as a network, Cultural Studies works towards understanding the productivity of power, rather than just criticizing ideological distortions. Most importantly, such an analysis can open a situation to political intervention:

> Emancipatory politics must always destroy the appearance of a 'natural order', must reveal what is presented as necessary and inevitable to be a mere contingency, just as it must make what was previously deemed to be impossible seem attainable. [24]

At the present moment, Cultural Studies thus asks, for example: "How is the climate crisis represented? On whose terms is the crisis communicated? On what, and from where are the dominant narratives around climate change centered? And from which direction are dissenting voices interrupting dominant narratives?" This way, Cultural Studies can help "to contextualize the crises within a history of colonization, foreign policy, global economic disparities and racialized injustices". [25] This way, Cultural Studies can help finding new articulations within and beyond the present conjuncture.

In-between Conjuncture and Articulation: Methods

There is a lot we know now about articulations and conjunctures. But how do we, as researchers, get from the one to the other? What exactly is the way from the small to the great, or from the big picture to the little detail? Research methods are, literally, ways of doing things; the Greek *methodos* combines *méta* ('at a higher level') with *hodós* ('way') and can be translated as 'about the way'. Before you think about 'ways', though, you should know what your goal is. Without a research question, without knowing where you want to go, thinking about routes makes little sense.

Given the great variety of objects of research (film, TV, books, newspapers, social media, media hardware, habits, festivals, birth, work, school, death, etc.), as well as the manifold contexts in which these

objects appear, Cultural Studies has not developed any specific, recognized research methods that can be applied in all instances. In fact, you will find very little under the term 'methods' in introductory books to Cultural Studies; Chris Barker's widely read *Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice*, now in its fifth edition, devotes a mere 7 of its 722 pages to "Questions of Methodology". [26] Notwithstanding the scarcity of explicit methods, many projects within Cultural Studies follow similar paths by adjusting and adopting exemplary studies.

Two such exemplary studies, which became somewhat of a blueprint for Cultural Studies research, are Stuart Hall's studies of newspapers and television. [27] The first path is set by Hall's introduction to a book called *Paper Voices: The Popular Press and Social Change*. Here, Hall identifies "two main purposes" of the research project: "to examine how the popular press interprets social change to its readers; and to explore and develop methods of close analysis as a contribution to the general field of cultural studies". [28] Here, we see how Hall first asserts the object and aim of his research, before declaring an interest in generalizing the specific 'methods of close analysis' used in the research project.

At the heart of the study that Hall conducted together with several colleagues at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham, UK, stands the following assumption:

> [At] all times, but especially in periods of rapid social change, the press performs a significant role as a social educator. By its consistent reporting and comment about people and events, the press reflects changing patterns of life in a society. More significantly, by its selectivity, emphasis, treatment and presentation, the press interprets that process of social change. [29]

Media do not simply *record* events, Hall emphasizes, but *interpret* the world and produce meaningful events – and they have specific *means* (selection, emphasis, presentation, etc.) at their disposal to do so.

Hall's study begins, as every good study, with a careful delineation as to why the materials were selected: which newspapers were chosen, and from which periods, and on which topics the focus should be. He then explains why a qualitative approach to what the papers say is much more useful to Cultural Studies than a purely quantitative one:

We wanted to bring to light, not the direct and explicit political or social appeals the newspapers made, but the structures of meanings and the configurations of feeling on which this public rhetoric is based. We wanted to know what image of the readers the newspaper was taking for granted when it assumed it could write *in that way* about politics and society. We wanted to know what image of the society supported the particular treatment given to any set of topics. We wanted to know how such assumptions came to be formed – in response to what historical and social circumstances: and how, through time, they were changed or adapted. [30]

Through the "analysis of language and rhetoric, of style and presentation", [31] the study did not so much attempt to ascertain how the newspapers presented or distorted a given reality, but rather how the newspapers inserted events into what they thought was a shared cultural framework, a shared discourse. News, in this sense, is a *social* product. Newspapers "employ verbal, visual and typographic means for 'making events and people in the news signify' for their readers". [32] Within such a process, the newspaper editor's reasoning might have been along the following lines: 'We know that you, the readers, are conservative, because you buy our paper, and we think that you want us to show immigrants as delinquents so that your animosity towards foreigners can be legitimized.' News, once again, is nothing without social context. A similar study of the social production of news within Cultural Studies is "Mugging: A Case Study in the Media", which shows how a number of scattered incidents are forged into a unified form, an *articulation*, that addresses a specific audience with specific expectations within a specific social, economic and political situation, that is, a *conjuncture*. [33]

While the the studies presented so far concentrate on the factors at work in the social *production* of news, i.e. the "technical infrastructure" of media, the "structures of production" in which they are embedded and the "frameworks of knowledge" of those involved in encoding meaning, the second line of study to be highlighted focuses on decoding processes performed in *consumption* by readers, listeners and viewers. [34] Cultural Studies suggest that media "circulate and cement 'dominant ideological definitions and representations' (Hall) of what is deviant and thus illegitimate, versus what is valued". [35] However, as the semiotic approach to meaning suggests, media producers merely assume and presuppose

that consumers with specific social and political positions, with preformed identities, will read their products in the intended way. Readers with other social and political positions might decode these meanings differently. In his seminal study on *Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse*, Hall distinguishes between a 'dominant-hegemonic', an 'oppositional' and a 'negotiated' reading, depending on the social, economic and political position of readers, viewers and listeners. [36] So-called 'consumers', it turns out, are just as important in the production of meaning as those that are conventionally called 'producers'.

The encoding/decoding model opened the terrain and set the stage for what would become a central strand of Cultural Studies, concentrating on *recipients* and *consumers*, using ethnographic tools like participant observation, interviews and group talks. Several key figures within Cultural Studies have followed this path: Dorothy Hobson's study of "Housewives and the Mass Media", for example, was based on interviews conducted within the homes of Birmingham housewives, listening to what they had to say, but also observing what they were doing. [37] David Morley spoke to 29 focus groups, comprising individuals from different social backgrounds, about how they perceived *Nationwide*, a BBC current affairs television program. [38] Janice Radway joined female book clubs to find out how the women read romances and related the stories to their own lives. [39] Dick Hebdige immersed himself in the punk scene in order to learn to read the social meaning of punks' clothes, their music, their habits. [40]

Of course, you cannot simply copy a study of newspaper production from the 1930s, or a study of television consumption from the 1970s, when you want to analyze social media in the 2020s. You would surely get lost if you were to use an old map of London to walk the streets of contemporary Nairobi. What you can do, however, is to adapt the map to your own terrain to find your own way, your own *method*. In fact, it is the only thing you can do. Everyone was a beginner once, and everyone has to begin somewhere. Cultural Studies' insistence on the contingent nature of articulations and their dependence on specific historical contexts makes it impossible to simply copy someone else's method. Today, quite obviously, we encounter different media, different identities and different meanings; we encounter new articulations within a changing conjuncture. Nonetheless, previous studies are still the best guides for future research. See how they found their way, their method, and you will find yours.

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3. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson & Paula A. Treichler, "Cultural Studies: An Introduction", in: *Cultural Studies*, eds. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson & Paula A. Treichler, New York: 1992, 1-16, here p. 8.

4. Stuart Hall & Doreen Massey, "Interpreting the Crisis", *Soundings. A Journal of Politics and Culture* 44 (2010), 57-71, here p. 57.

5. Stuart Hall, *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left*, London: 1988, p. 41.

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8. Stuart Hall, "On Postmodernism and Articulation: An Interview with Stuart Hall", ed. Lawrence Grossberg, *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 10:2 (1986), 45-60, here p. 53.

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11. David Harris, "Articulation", in: *A Handbook of Leisure Studies*, eds. Chris Rojek, Susan M. Shaw & A. J. Veal, Basingstoke: 2006, 504-517, here p. 507.

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16. Stuart Hall, "Minimal Selves", in: *Identity. The Real Me*, ed. Lisa Appignanesi, ICA Documents 6, London: c. 1987, 44-46, here p. 45.

17. Chris Barker, *Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice*, 3rd ed., London: 2008, p. 10.

18. Hall, "On Postmodernism and Articulation", p. 54.

19. Grossberg, "Cultural Studies in Search of a Method", p. 46.

20. Jennifer Daryl Slack & J. Macgregor Wise, *Culture and Technology. A Primer*, 2nd ed., New York: 2015, p. 132.

21. Ibid., p. 155.

22. Cf. Raymond Williams, *Literature and Marxism*, Oxford: 1977, p. 121-126.

23. Stuart Hall, "Epilogue: Through the Prism of an Intellectual Life", in: *Culture, Politics, Race and Diaspora: The Thought of Stuart Hall*, ed. Brian Meeks, Kingston: 2007, 269-291, here p. 279.

24. Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is there No Alternative?* Winchester: 2009, p. 17.

25. Orsod Malik, "Frontlines: Land and the Climate Crisis with Abeer Butmeh, Dr Hamza Hamouchene and Sam Siva", January 18, 2022, *Stuart Hall Foundation* (accessed 4 Apr 2022).

26. Chris Barker & Emma A. Jane, *Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice*, 5th ed., Los Angeles: 2016, p. 35-42.

27. Cf. Linda Steiner, "'Wrestling with the Angels': Stuart Hall's Theory and Method", *Howard Journal of Communications* 27:2 (2016), 102-111.

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29. Ibid.

30. Ibid., p. 146.

31. Ibid.

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34. Stuart Hall, "Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse" (1973), *Writings on Media: History of the Present*, ed. Charlotte Brunsdon, New York: 2021, 247-266, here p. 251.

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