

# 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: here, culture does exist only in the form of *practices* that conjoin *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. Thus, 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”; culture 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, and how, resolves itself”.<sup>1</sup> 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”.<sup>2</sup> And this is not necessarily a bad thing: it can also take some pressure off you.

In order to deal with such problems of beginning and ending, 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”,<sup>3</sup> 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”.<sup>4</sup> 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”<sup>5</sup>, “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”.<sup>6</sup>

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.<sup>7</sup>

### *Articulations*

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.<sup>8</sup>

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.<sup>9</sup>

Cultural Studies, here, meets with a postmodern drive against every 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?”<sup>10</sup> You have to ask, which are “the agents at work in producing concrete and specific articulations”?<sup>11</sup> 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”.<sup>12</sup> 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, emphasises, 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”.<sup>13</sup>

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”.<sup>14</sup> 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.

<sup>15</sup>

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”.<sup>16</sup> 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”.<sup>17</sup> 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 who is doing the articulation (speaking, organizing, connecting etc.). Thus, you have to ask, who or what has the *power* to articulate? Articulation is a *practice* done by humans, institutions and organisations 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: “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”.<sup>18</sup> Contingent as they may be, articulations “have real effects”<sup>19</sup> when they are part of a wider network of articulations, and cannot be easily undone. Thus, a *conjuncture* is “made up of myriad *articulations* (...) that make some things possible, others not”;<sup>20</sup> every articulation “empowers possibilities and disempowers others; legitimizes some identities and delegitimizes others; makes some things happen and other things not”.<sup>21</sup> Articulations are productive, they constitute reality.

In order to understand what is articulated, Cultural Studies has to approach its objects of study from various perspectives. The most common approaches are: a) various forms of ‘textual’ analysis of representations in books, films, songs, video games etc.; b) reception studies in order to understand the decoding process, and production studies to understand the encoding of meaning; and c) ethnographic studies in order to comprehend everyday signifying practices. We look at *meanings, media, and humans* – and at the socio-economic, institutional, organizational, technological and natural *contexts*, the conditions and circumstances of their articulations and the power structures that relate them.

The aim of a cultural study should be to unfold how a specific articulation (or set of articulations) is formed and upheld – and then to ask ourselves how this is connected to the conjuncture at large. What interests Cultural Studies are the means of creating relative stability in a world full of contradictions and antagonisms, as well as the possibility of re-articulations that challenge such apparent stability. Besides the dominant forms of culture, we can always also find residual and emergent alternatives.<sup>22</sup> 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.

<sup>23</sup>

### *The Articulation and the Conjuncture of Cultural Studies*

Necessarily, Cultural Studies, in the way it has come together, the way it is articulated, is itself a product of a specific conjuncture. The increasing power of the mass media since the middle of the twentieth century can be seen as an expression of a growing tendency to try to win people’s approval of existing conditions, not (only) by force and coercion, but by cultural consent. Consequently, the ability to interpret and define events and also to create representative images became a central part of social struggles, as important as the control over economic resources or the exercise of political power.<sup>24</sup> Cultural Studies’ methodological concentration on media is a result of this development.

It is not clear whether the times we are living in now are still part of this conjuncture. Deep internet penetration and climate disaster have highlighted the globally networked character of human and non-human agents and actions. To meet these new conditions, conjunctural analysis is increasingly supplemented by what is known as ‘assemblage studies’, where “the social sphere” is re-conceptualised “as a situational articulation of human and non-human actors”, be they technological or biological, be they material or imaginary.<sup>25</sup>

What Cultural Studies has to come to grips with in the future are socio-bio-technical assemblages of human actors, animate beings and algorithmic bots, under conditions provided by an inanimate and platformed transnational infrastructure environment. Although recent online movements like #metoo or #blacklivesmatter have shown that questions of representation and identity are still relevant today, Cultural Studies will have to further develop its analytical tools in order to understand the coming conjunctures. What we will need are more complex understandings of the forces included in the make-up of such conjunctures, looking beyond visible acts of discriminatory exclusion and violence (at the hand of the state as well as misogynist, xeno- and transphobic actors) as the main executions of power. Instead, we will have to find the tools to understand the ‘slow violence’ of environmental devastation and digital desolation. We will have to learn to see through the immediate political-economic factors in order to understand

the much grander social-ecological scale of the capitalist hellworld, in which both economic and political exclusion are buoyed by a much more fundamental, indirect violence in the long, and often literally inherited, maldistribution of health outcomes derived from the uneven geography of environmental devastation (here including both the large-scale environment of ecosystems, watersheds, etc. but also the small-scale environment of the human body).<sup>26</sup>

Naturally, there is little that Cultural Studies can say about the chemical and physical causes and the biological and medical consequences of climate change and multispecies extinction; technically, it has little to say about the engineering and programming of networked digital communication systems. Cultural Studies can, however, contribute to understanding the norms and values, the ideologies and institutions, the principles and frameworks that articulate the relationship of humans to the natural and the technological world. At the present moment, Cultural Studies thus asks: “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?”<sup>27</sup> This way, future Cultural Studies can help “to contextualize the (current climate) crises within a history of colonization, foreign policy, global economic disparities and racialized injustices”.<sup>28</sup>

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4. Stuart Hall & Doreen Massey, "Interpreting the Crisis", *Soundings. A Journal of Politics and Culture* 44 (2010), 57-71, here p. 57.
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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. Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is there No Alternative?* Winchester: 2009, p. 17.
24. Cf. "Das Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS)", *Ästhetik & Kommunikation* 24 (1976), 35-38.
25. Alexa Färber, "Low-budget Berlin. Towards an Understanding of Low-budget Urbanity as Assemblage", *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society* 7 (2014), 119-136, here p. 121.
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28. *Ibid.*

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