

Cultural Studies Now? Cultural Studies Now!

Christian Moraru

University of North Carolina, Greensboro

You wonder if everyone and everything in the world is intimately related. . . . You pluck a thread and it leads to . . . everywhere. . . . Is there a limit to relatedness?

—Bharati Mukherjee, *The Tree Bride*

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?”¹ 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 in 1999.² So, it seems, 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. Even at places where cultural theorists are not running the show (and more often than not they do not), what they do has definitely acquired an enviable aura, a panache, 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 U.S. 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 fifteen years ago or so. It is in this sense that people have come to know "about" it, perhaps tolerate it in their departments, 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 an object, an approach, 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 research units 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 postmodern controversy, with the "anti-pomo" 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 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.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 would not entail a political decision, taking up a position.

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 these limits, the critics who still deem the debate worth their while pull out an ideological. They offer 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 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 critic here would much rather spend her time perusing cereal boxes, as Don DeLillo quips in *White Noise*, and even then she would do it to “theorize” the whole experience, that is, to contrive some sort of connection between her “trivial” material and the hole in the ozone layer or some such. For the critic is not an honest, disinterested reader. The critic is a theorist. But wait a minute: this theorist *n'est pas une* either.

She is 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, zones 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. Their opposing approaches reflect the contrast: on the one hand, a "smooth" aesthetic method, self-enclosed, confident in its fiefdom, terminology, and tools; on the other, a "fuzzy" modus operandi, fraught with contradictions, unstable, self-examining, 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 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 in a domain 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 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. 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, 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 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 Bush administration’s foreign policy, 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: Global Cultural Studies

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 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—and here I am just taking some preliminary steps—is the kind of challenge this type of society and its culture, or cultures, present us with.

As Charles Taylor points 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.’”⁴ 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.”⁵ It grows, tells the story of this growth—defines itself—in relation to an other and her

own relations or stories. A 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 Jacques 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.⁶ It is a vibrant domain—and a temporality—in which the self makes himself into what he 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 her very distinctiveness, by what sets 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 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 a 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 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 comparative work across traditions, where the plural and the hybrid must be emphasized. As an 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: 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 becoming fast a thing of the past. 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. 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 domain itself, where culture *is* or if it can still be physically located as it has

been for centuries. And we may well discover that alongside culture, older, modernist notions of space, time, tradition, 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 is increasingly indicative of the kind of culture we live in as well as of the challenges cultural studies is facing today.

Notes

1. Rita Felski, “The Role of Aesthetics in Cultural Studies,” in Berubé, *The Aesthetics of Cultural Studies*, 28. As for the title of my article, the reader will recall the funny illustration on the front cover of Michael Bérubé’s book *Public Access: Literary Theory and American Cultural Politics* (London: Verso, 1994).
2. Rita Felski, “Scholars [W]ho Disdain Cultural Studies Don’t Know What They [A]re Talking About,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 23, 1999. Qtd. in Felski, “The Role of Aesthetics,” 41.
3. Michael Bérubé, “Introduction: Engaging the Aesthetic,” in Bérubé, *The Aesthetics of Cultural Studies* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 10-16.
4. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 36.

5. Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, eds. Vern McGee, trans. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 143.
6. Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other; or, The Prosthesis of Origin*, trans. Patrick Mensah (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 19.