



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

This is a repository copy of *What cultural, critical and communication might mean-and why cultural studies is a bit like rave culture*.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:
<http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/80978/>

Version: Submitted Version

Article:

Hesmondhalgh, D (2013) What cultural, critical and communication might mean-and why cultural studies is a bit like rave culture. *Communication and Critical/ Cultural Studies*, 10 (2-3). 280 - 284. ISSN 1479-1420

<https://doi.org/10.1080/14791420.2013.813783>

Reuse

Unless indicated otherwise, fulltext items are protected by copyright with all rights reserved. The copyright exception in section 29 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 allows the making of a single copy solely for the purpose of non-commercial research or private study within the limits of fair dealing. The publisher or other rights-holder may allow further reproduction and re-use of this version - refer to the White Rose Research Online record for this item. Where records identify the publisher as the copyright holder, users can verify any specific terms of use on the publisher's website.

Takedown

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing eprints@whiterose.ac.uk including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.



eprints@whiterose.ac.uk
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>

What Cultural, Critical and Communication Might Mean - and Why Cultural Studies is A Bit Like Rave Culture

David Hesmondhalgh (University of Leeds)

I re-entered the world of universities in 1991, after a few years of travelling, teaching in what I believe North Americans would call 'senior high school', and not having a clue what I wanted to do with my life. By some miracle, I'd won a scholarship to study Film and Television at Northwestern University, just outside Chicago. Every Monday evening in Evanston, a cross-departmental cultural studies seminar would take place, of Faculty members and grad students. Immensely smart people gave up their evenings for this thing called cultural studies – if only to find out what it was. It certainly seemed to be something different from what I'd encountered in the UK. There the main thrust of cultural studies had been to take popular culture and the media seriously. In the USA, it was much more about people from a whole swathe of humanities and social science fields, trying to rethink their disciplines, freed by cult studs' deep mistrust of institutions. (An even more marked contrast was that no alcohol seemed to be consumed, before, during or after the evening seminar; this would *never* have happened in Britain).

What cult studs in its British and American forms shared was an excitement about new theories, about the way that feminism and anti-racism were shaking things up. Cultural studies was like a political movement. New frontiers seemed to be opening, new ways of thinking about history, about culture, about meaning. Everyone with their head screwed on knew that popular culture, the media and everyday life had been neglected, and it was time to correct that. At Northwestern, people from history, museum studies, art, performance, anthropology, communications and a whole range of other fields came together to discuss how these issues related to their disciplines.

When, as a result of my continuing cluelessness and complicated love life, I returned early to the UK after just a year in the States, I was lucky enough to end up doing a doctorate in the Media and Communication department at Goldsmiths College, part of the University of London, and a high-quality place back then, as it is now. On one side were a group of academics who had been very strongly influenced by the variant of cultural studies developed at Birmingham, and some of whom had been a key part of developments there. On the other side were a smaller group, whose radical social democratic politics were collapsing in disarray in a newly neo-liberal Britain, and who felt that cultural studies was doing little to combat this. I felt torn, belonging to both camps and yet neither. This was the era of cultural studies versus political economy. At the time, and many times since, people have talked about how this was a division that should never have existed. But you could feel the struggle in the air at Goldsmiths in the early 1990s. And cultural studies was winning, hands down.

A few years later, in the year 2000, when a big cultural studies conference took place at Birmingham University, I swear the crowds parted before Stuart Hall and his

companions as they entered the hall. The applause had a rapturous quality. It wasn't Hall's fault - he didn't invite a personality cult. It wasn't his admirers' fault either. He'd helped establish a space in which people could think seriously about popular culture and representation seriously, from within the humanities, and some people in social sciences felt liberated by this too. It was thrilling to be freed of the dogma and dowdiness of the traditional academic disciplines. And it helped that Hall was charming and gifted. No wonder people were in awe.

Yet within what felt like months, but probably a few years, cultural studies had entered into a precipitous decline. Hall had retired, and was much less to be seen and heard. The conferences lost their energy, the new ideas and key publications appeared much less frequently.

I now think of cultural studies as the equivalent of electronic dance music in the era of rave: big in the 1990s, and then, at around the turn of the century, something happened. Just like electronic dance music, there's lots of good and interesting stuff that's happened in cultural studies since, much of it in places beyond its origins. But it's mainly followed by a small group of devotees, who deny that they're looking back to the glory years, but depend very much on a sense of that hallowed past.

I think there were various reasons for the decline of cultural studies. First, most people, in most disciplines, accepted by the early 2000s that it was valid to study popular culture, everyday life and the media in some form, and were busy doing it. So what was cultural studies (in the sense of studying these things) for? Cultural studies had achieved significant victories, and because it was mainly an oppositional formation, that perhaps took the edge off it. Second, for many people with strong links to the political left, it was obvious that cultural studies had lost the close links it once had with political activism, and was increasingly an academic pursuit. Nothing wrong with academic pursuits, and not everything we do has to advance political struggle, but cultural studies was founded on a political project. What's more, the triumph of neo-liberalism, neo-conservatism, finance capitalism and the comprehensive class war victory of Bush, Blair and their buddies made many 1990s cult studies concerns appear parochial and/or trivial. Third, as Graeme Turner shows superbly in his recent book,ⁱ cultural studies failed to establish an institutional basis for itself pretty much anywhere, partly as a result of its befuddled attitude to the politics of institutionalisation. It's all very well to celebrate interdisciplinarity (who isn't ambivalent about disciplines these days?) but unless there are students learning and research councils funding under the banner of cultural studies, then it's really just something people do alongside other things. In Britain, media and communication studies has a much more solid institutional basis than cultural studies – funding streams, a subject association, audit review panels. This is in spite of 'media studies' having been attacked for years in Britain because of the snobbish disdain of 'traditional' humanities and social sciences, and a fiercely anti-intellectual media who think they should have a monopoly on commenting on what they do. 'Cultural studies', like 'film studies' and sometimes 'television studies' is usually

tacked on to the end of media and communication studies in the workings of Higher Ed bureaucracy. Elsewhere, cultural studies is shorthand for the high theory bit of fine art or literary studies.

And just like electronic dance music after its decline, cultural studies had a huge influence elsewhere. Especially of course in internet and web studies, where the populist wing of cultural studies found a very comfortable new home, and where the endless creativity of prosumption, co-creation etc could be celebrated. Some combined this with an interest in creative industries boosterism, working alongside the ISAs, in a strange and well-funded hotch-potch of Foucault and pragmatism (though the Foucault bit has gradually been dropped in favour of Schumpeter and others). The high theorists gradually found new gods – Latour, Badiou, Ranciere and so on. Some have tried to reinvent cultural studies as the study of whatever happens to be going on, ‘the conjuncture’. But if that’s what it’s supposed to be then, as Justin O’Connor has pointed out,ⁱⁱ it can be hard to distinguish the interventions of cultural studies from those parts of other disciplines that are also interested in the contemporary (like more or less the whole of social science for example), other than a rather vague set of political commitments.

So, although part of me will forever be cultural studies, these days I find it hard to get too interested in debates about the future of cultural studies. I feel much more bothered by other terms in the title of this journal: ‘communication’ and ‘critical’.ⁱⁱⁱ I work in a department called the Institute of Communications Studies. It’s much more usual in the UK for the term ‘media’ to be emphasised. Lots of my colleagues in other disciplines at Leeds don’t really understand what communication(s) studies means – like many of our prospective students, they seem to think it must be something to do with PR, marketing, and advertising. In the UK, media studies still has a more critical ring to it. Yet part of me still wants to redeem the emancipatory meanings of communication. Even if frictionless communication is a dangerous fantasy, the goal of better communication still seems a worthwhile one, as John Durham Peters has eloquently argued.^{iv}

As for what ‘critical’ might mean and should mean.... For me, it still comes down to politics. I’d describe mine as (in no particular order) socialist, feminist, green and internationalist, and very much tangled up with the experience of class and of growing up in the post-industrial North of England, with its poverty and decay, its beauty and history, and its hilarious and constraining way of putting people who get too big for their boots in their place. Of course I constantly fail to live up to my ethical commitments in the way I live, and in what I write. There are certain writers that I go back to time and again for help, even if I hardly ever agree with them fully. Some of them are identifiably figures who’ve had, or continue to have, a pretty strong association with cultural studies: Berlant, Couldry, Frith, Gilroy, McRobbie, Ross. But lots of them aren’t. For decades, Nancy Fraser has illuminated the articulations between different elements of the politics I’ve just named.^v I can’t think of anyone I’d rather read than David Harvey when I want to get my head round the latest outrageous triumph of

international finance capitalism, or why it's so hard to fight against its role in environmental catastrophe. Andrew Sayer is the kind of writer that cultural studies has almost totally ignored, perhaps because he takes ethics, epistemology, and the philosophy of social science seriously, and these are areas that cultural studies has for too long regarded with excessive levels of disregard, suspicion and even hostility.^{vi}

In the great non-debate about whether clarity and transparency are bourgeois illusions,^{vii} I'm on the side of clarity and transparency every time. As I've aged, I've become more impressed by what it takes to construct an argument well, in a way that leaves the reader in a position to assess whether the writer's got it right or not. I continue to like passionate polemics, but I've also come to admire writers who make their values clear, rather than assuming that everybody knows where they're coming from. I know some people who find any attempt to argue a position to be an act of epistemic violence. I know that such folks are responding to false universalism and other sins. But it seems to me that making one's normative grounds clear, when done with appropriate tentativeness and humility, is a real virtue. It gives people a better chance to disagree, to decide what they think, and to learn.

I've come to think of critical analysis of culture as involving an effort to balance various things that need to be considered: the local and the international; experience and abstraction; empirics and theory; anger and wisdom; economics and life as it's lived; structural constraints and human flourishing; policy pragmatism and utopianism. I can see that much of this is what cultural studies was in its own way trying and often failing to do. Personally I never ever get it right either. But I look forward to seeing what writers in this journal manage to do over its next ten years.

ⁱ Graeme Turner, *What's Become of Cultural Studies?* (London and Los Angeles: Sage, 2012).

ⁱⁱ Justin O'Connor (2012) "We need to talk about cultural studies", *Cultural Studies Review* 18,2 (2012).

ⁱⁱⁱ In case it's not clear, one of the ways in which Jim Hay prompted us to share our thoughts for this special issue was to suggest that we might comment on the terms in the title of the journal, and to do so in rather more informal and anecdotal terms than is usually possible in journals. I've broadly tried to do this. I'll leave the meaning of 'studies' aside for now. But that / slash in the title of this journal amuses and intrigues me. Was it supposed to imply that cultural studies and critical studies were the same thing? If so, was the timing of its introduction a little hubristic, given that cultural studies hit its long downturn not long after the launch of the journal?

^{iv} John Durham Peters *Speaking Into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

^v See, among many other examples from her work, Nancy Fraser, *Scales of Justice: Reimagining Political Space in a Globalizing World* (Cambridge: Polity, 2008).

^{vi} See, among many other examples from his work, Andrew Sayer, *Why Things Matter to People* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

^{vii} Jonathan Culler and Kevin Lamb (eds) *Just Being Difficult?* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003).
