



INTRODUCTION: CULTURAL ANALYSIS

The perspective on cultural analysis presented in this book aims to be multidimensional in its approach to scholarship and orientated towards the critical study of issues that are of public interest.

A multidimensional analysis seeks to make sense of the ontological complexity of cultural phenomena – that is, the many-sidedness of their existence. It is concerned with the circulation of culture and the interaction of production and consumption, including the materiality and signficatory qualities of cultural forms.

There are innumerable possible topics that might be studied in such a way, none of which would necessarily be lacking in value. Choices have to be made, however; decisions have to be taken as to priority. That is why questions of public interest are privileged in this account.

Questions of public interest refer to issues that are, for one reason or another, salient and contested for the citizens of a polity – a polity defined in inclusive rather than exclusive terms. We live in an interconnected social world and natural environment where cosmopolitan values are sorely needed. These questions of public interest become matters of debate that may have consequence for democratic decisionmaking in not only local, national and regional contexts but also continentally and on a global scale.

This perspective on cultural analysis might be controversial. Yet, some position-taking is required, it has to be said, on practical grounds and in order to distinguish the approach to ‘cultural analysis under consideration from other kinds of analysis. That is not to say the perspective adopted here covers all which could reasonably be named ‘cultural analysis’ in the sense of studying symbolic process. There are many disciplinary specialisms that would come within a broader definition of cultural analysis. These are too broad and all-encompassing, though, for the purposes in hand, such as art history, literary criticism, musicology and – to cite another example that

comes quite close to the present agenda – social anthropology. In any case, attempting to catalogue every conceivable strand of cultural analysis in a single book would be lunatic – comparable to the futile quest of the mythologist Casaubon in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*.

This book draws largely and specifically on the British tradition of cultural studies and the European tradition of critical social theory. Each of these has a particular history, established canon of work and pantheon of leading thinkers – none of it beyond question and settled forever. These are fluid traditions that are similarly characterized by a certain disrespectfulness for tradition as such. They are both interdisciplinary, as is this book. Both, however, had disciplinary points of departure – literary history and political philosophy, respectively.

My own disciplinary background is mixed, covering sociology, literature, the history of ideas and the multidisciplinary of mass communications research. Programmatic interdisciplinarity is given much lip-service in the academy but seldom practised securely since it is always vulnerable to the criticism of superficiality from the point of view of disciplinarity. Still, public issues of consequence in 'the real world' do not fit comfortably into disciplinary categories and, for that reason, interdisciplinary research is worth the try.

The distinguishing feature of British cultural studies was the project to democratize our understanding of culture. It therefore encouraged, in effect, the synthesis of what in English can be referred to as 'Culture' with a capital C, on the one hand, and, on the other, lower-case 'culture' as the medium of social communication. That synthesis has been problematic in that it blurs some important distinctions that are still relevant – for instance, those between art and speech. Most importantly, however, it challenged elitist assumptions and promoted appreciation of the popular.

This move in the game was progressive, though it did have troubling results when questions of value (which is one way of defining 'culture' – that it is about values), paradoxically, became, in some quarters, impossible to pose. It is a matter of common record that the moment of British cultural studies was instrumental in establishing a new field of study – cultural studies – that long ago expanded beyond its British 'origins'.

The tradition of critical social theory is less easily located and summed up since, in some ways, it represents the distinguishing feature of European political philosophy as a whole – albeit intermittently since 'ancient' times – not all of which, incidentally, is actually critical of the existing state of society.

In the modern era, the critical tradition of social theory developed from German historicism, the critique of the political economy of capitalism and the ideology critique of capitalist culture, while retaining the critical rationalism inherited from the European Enlightenment that was centred on France in the eighteenth century. It was the counterpoint to positivist social science and, also, the sheer banality of much empirical sociology. European social theory of a critical persuasion anticipated many of the themes developed somewhat independently by British cultural studies. There were, however, some striking differences.

The European tradition favoured avant-garde culture and was critical of mass consumer culture. For that reason, it met with a measure of resistance and, indeed, opposition in Britain, where the cultural activity of 'the people' – even under highly commercialized conditions – was treated with greater respect, to the extent that it was increasingly contrasted favourably with 'elitist' high culture. Still, both traditions had much in common, motivated by emancipatory interests, and, while the British tradition emphasized concrete detail over abstract thought, Continental rationalism was a vital corrective to the empirical verging on empirist mode of separatist Britain.

Older forms of cultural analysis tended to study the past – largely because it was assumed that time had to pass in order for posterity to do its work of selecting texts that were worthy of serious academic scrutiny. In contrast, newer forms of cultural analysis – pioneered by British cultural studies and the Continental tradition of critical social theory – typically studied the present conditions of culture, which was refreshing. They had something to say about now, albeit in a historical framework.

The present is itself a moment in time within a particular configuration of history. Moreover, it became permissible to study mass popular culture – the culture of most people – not just the culture of a refined minority that had been inherited from the past. Thus, in the 1960s and 1970s, cultural studies in Britain was *contemporary* cultural studies.

There was disquiet at the way literary methods were used to interpret what sociologists had regarded jealously as their disciplinary subject matter. On the other side, it was feared that the sociological turn was in danger of reducing culture to society.

Cultural analysis is methodologically pluralist as far as this book is concerned, drawing freely on methods as and when appropriate to the analytical problem under investigation. In this sense, it is parasitic on a wide range of disciplines and a bit of a pest, rather like a magpie. It also offends against a disciplinary methodism whereby correctly prescribed technique is reified over and above the subject matter of the enquiry. To a considerable extent, cultural analysis remains insufficiently serious according to a pristine disciplinarity and, at the same time, it is deemed an impractical and unrealistic sideshow to the serious business of solving research problems defined and funded by capital and the State.

Moreover, since cultural analysis – in the sense that I am using the term – is so much concerned with current developments, it is likely to cross over with journalism. There is a curiously unexamined relation between cultural analysis and cultural journalism.

For much of academia, journalism is anathema because it is focused on the fleeting and all too transient features of life, forever chasing novelty and discarding yesterday's story. Academic work is much slower – tortoise-like in comparison with the haring about of journalism. Xenos paradox and its version in Aesop's Fables is relevant here because academics do generally believe that their slower, painstaking work is of greater value than the

flotsam and jetsam of day-to-day news. Indeed, it is not unusual for academics to hold a disparaging view of journalism.

Of course, journalists have little patience with the complex detachment and what they may perceive as the pedantry and sheer lack of urgency of academic work. When they draw on research findings, journalists are apt to reduce them to overly simplistic bullet points.

Academics persistently complain, with good reason, about the journalistic misuse and misrepresentation of their arduous work. Still, however, there is a relation.

When studying current events and unfolding developments of one kind or another, academics do have to draw on journalistic source material. Such material has to be treated with the kind of caution that historians apply to archival documentation – that is, being cognisant of textual features, the author–reader relation, the political context and the time–space conjuncture in which the evidence is produced.

Seen more positively, however, much journalistic writing – especially in some feature journalism and book form – is better as a means of communication than academic writing, which so often seems to the lay reader like the secret code of a mysterious sect. Inevitably, in a book of this kind, academic work strays occasionally into the territory of journalism and at least aims to be as communicative as the better examples.

It is not surprising that academics should be inclined to shy away from topical matters, avoiding them because they are apparently the sole preserve of journalists. The work of this book, though, takes a risk by addressing current issues of public interest and debate (much of it published too long after the event to be still newsworthy, however). It is interesting to recall now, for instance, that the controversy over the Millennium Dome was the biggest news story of the year 2000 in Britain as the gigantic tent has since become an everyday commercial venue after being abandoned wastefully by the New Labour government to murky business interests. Yet, the story was never just about an ill-conceived exposition. It was always about murky business interests, promoted with public money by governmental authority. Indeed, as I argue in Chapter 3, the Millennium Dome controversy was about something much deeper and more consequential than a poorly managed exhibition and not just for the ‘sceptred isle’ – to wit, the neoliberal turn of social democracy, which, in fact, has become a global phenomenon.

Such topical analysis, then, aims to make sense of a particular case in its significant detail at a specific moment – in effect, representing a flashpoint that is quite possibly symptomatic of deep-seated and longer-term processes of cultural and social change. In that sense, it is an exercise in critical–realist analysis. If journalism is the first draft of history, this style of cultural analysis is one sort of second draft.

This book is concerned with methodology in cultural analysis but it is not a nuts-and-bolts textbook on methods. There are rules and technical procedures that should indeed be observed for analysing culture in the

humanities and social sciences. As many researchers – though not all, unfortunately – know, however, great deal of research effort, in practice, involves imagination and invention. It is necessary to draw on established theories, appropriate and adapt techniques, to be sure, but, sometimes, we have to fashion new ones – in problem-formulation, data-gathering and analysis appropriate to the object of enquiry – so as to produce original interpretations and adequate explanations. It is not just a matter of following an already prescribed set of rules. It is as much art as science.

The opening chapter spells out my formulation of the concept of a *cultural* public sphere, by which I mean the affective – that is, aesthetic and emotional – aspects of the public sphere. Research on the public sphere as the forum for debate in a democracy has generally neglected affectivity, sometimes dismissing it as a spoiling agent for what should properly be an exclusively cognitive means of exchanging information and arena for open communication. Such a neglectful attitude fails to grasp the role of art and popular culture in articulating public issues that capture not only people's attention but also their imagination. An example of the operations of the cultural public sphere is addressed in Chapter 2 – the extraordinary response to the death and funeral of Diana, Princess of Wales in 1997, when issues of symbolic authority and relationships between men and women were articulated. This was an especially notable phenomenon in Britain but also around the world.

The third chapter, on the controversy over the Millennium Dome, is a case study in multidimensional cultural analysis, whereby the intersection of determinations is examined in order to make sense of a complex phenomenon in the round, so to speak. It looks at how the exposition was produced – its social construction – and mediated by broadcasting and the press and interpreted somewhat differently by actual visitors. This process involves giving due consideration to the ideological framing of the Dome's representational meanings within a specific political and economic context.

The Dome case study also begins to address questions of national identity that are taken up in Chapter 4 in connection with multiculturalism. There, I discuss a report on multicultural Britain that met with near unanimous hostility throughout the news media, despite the remarkable good sense of its carefully constructed arguments and recommendations. In that chapter, the notion of a 'community of communities' – formulated admittedly in a particular national context – is contrasted favourably with the celebrated 'clash of civilizations' thesis that takes the whole world at its canvas, but, strangely, on close interrogation, turns out to be more parochial in its purview, emanating from a narrow-mindedly American context.

Chapter 5 takes the argument concerning multiculturalism further, considering national and ethnic identities in the British Isles. It notes an illiberal drift in public culture, bound up with issues around migration, religious differences and geopolitical tension, countered by some progressive developments in popular culture but, at the same time, underscored by a fashionable derision of the weak and marginalized in popular culture, as exemplified by the counter reaction to 'political correctness' seen in one of

the most popular television programmes of the 2000s – the comedy sketch show, *Little Britain*.

The following chapter on the mobile phone shifts register from discussion of topical issues that have been especially newsworthy to consideration of the advent of new communications technology and increasingly mobile sociality. It is primarily methodological in focus, looking at various sociological methods for studying a rapidly changing and ubiquitous technology. This provides the opportunity to not only map out ways of investigating the relations between technology and social change but also clarify the range of multidimensional cultural analysis in a predominantly anthropological mode that is, in addition, related to economic and political process.

Chapter 7, on risk and individualization, looks at the implications of the risk society thesis for cultural analysis, which are many and varied. Risk consciousness is itself a notable cultural phenomenon that may or may not represent the actuality of risk in the world. This is a matter of considerable dispute and controversy, ranging from doom-laden alarmism – particularly concerning industrialism's impact on the natural environment – to Panglossian complacency and irresponsible political inaction.

How we understand ecological, societal and personal risk is mediated in all sorts of arguably faulty and inadequate ways by the major media of communication. It is very difficult to be sure of anything in the risk society. That is so at the level of individual self-identity and personal relationships, too – a level of existence that is illuminated immensely by the concept of individualization.

The chapter looks specifically at the individualization of work and the insecurity of careers in 'the creative industries' – a topic taken further in the next chapter, which addresses urban regeneration and cultural policy.

It is curious how 'culture' has come to be a panacea for social woes, so that somehow cultural policy can do the job of social policy. This is particularly strange considering the sheer dominance of economic reason today, that everything is ultimately reducible to economy. These are twin reductionisms, with cultural reductionism now accompanying the more familiar economic reductionism.

Logically, they seem to contradict one another, yet they are so often found together, as in the idea that culture – whatever that means – may solve the economic and, indeed, social problems of deindustrialized cities in the former industrial heartlands in the North, now that so much manufacturing has been transferred to cheap labour markets in the South.

This strange combination is a feature of hegemonic neoliberalism, successor to the social democratic consensus that prevailed in the mid-twentieth century. The idea is that capital and 'enterprise' should be released from the stultifying regulation of the State and public subsidy – in effect, the dead hand of socialism. Yet, what we find in projects of urban renewal through cultural policy (exemplified in Chapter 8 by the annual European Capital of Culture festival) is that the State – through local, national or international arrangements and finance – is required to provide the largesse

needed to let business rip while fostering illusory hope with delusions of grandeur in beleaguered populations.

We are often told today that the era in which ideology was a prevalent force in the world has ended. Yet, at the same time it is quite evident that neoliberal ideology is massively dominant in the world, not only in business circles but also throughout commonsense reasoning and everyday conduct. Still, it is most nakedly present in business, though not simply as a set of economic nostrums but as a whole way of being, a way of being that in my work I have found it necessary to call ‘cool capitalism’. By this mean the incorporation of disaffection into the capitalist way of life, the effect of which is to neutralize criticism.

Chapter 9 takes a very obvious instance of cool capitalism and the popular appeal of business enterprise in contemporary culture – the television show *The Apprentice* – and produces a critical discourse analysis of its ideological mode of representation. This chapter is also meant to exemplify the value of close textual analysis of cultural form – a practice that has been rather undervalued by an emphasis on differential reading of texts that denies any preferred meaning in audience research. The chapter stresses a certain determinacy of textual meaning in the construction of popular knowledge and public culture.

The concluding chapter looks at the coalescence of the academic field known as ‘cultural studies’ with the popular face of neoliberal ideology that I have named ‘cool capitalism’. This involves a survey of the development of cultural studies from its best-known place of origin – Britain from the 1950s and 1960s – to the latest rationale for the field a decade into the twenty-first century.

It is important to appreciate that cultural studies is diverse in both its formation and extant strands of education and research. Having said that, Chapter 10 is principally concerned with tracing a certain pragmatic reconfiguration of the field that moves it towards becoming useful and applied instead of merely critical. Something is gained in such a trajectory, but a great deal is lost.

In the chapter, I reiterate my own version of cultural analysis – irrespective of its location in cultural studies, sociology or elsewhere – that it should be multidimensional in methodology and orientated towards the critical study of issues of public interest. Along the way an assessment is given of the drift of cultural studies that might possibly be read, I recognize, as an obituary, but I hope not.