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Cultural Studies in the Classroom: an Assessment of the Reading List

In order to ensure a certain degree of methodological rigor in creating our selection of texts, at least a naïve form of requirement-management is advisable: What is the overall purpose of the list and what is the context in which it will be used? What requirements follow from the combination of these two items for the inclusion of individual texts and for the internal structure of the list?

The reading list provides the content, based on which the participants of the course attain a basic understanding of the fundamental theories and methods of Cultural Studies. This means that the content of each text has to be relevant and accessible for the participants in order to be used both in the group work and in online discussion. The difficulty and structure of the texts have to be judged with special care, because the actual texts form the basis of knowledge only for those groups to which they are assigned and the majority of participants will not have read all the texts, meaning that they rely on their peers to explain the content to them. Any difficulties the reader encounters due to the style or structure of the original texts are in danger of being amplified during the group stage because a presentation based on an incomplete understanding of the text makes the concepts involved even harder to grasp.

All of this makes the decision whether a text belongs on the list or not a non-trivial problem in so far as the decision rests not only on the properties of the text itself but also on its relation to the other texts on the list, and the picture their combination paints of Cultural Studies. What this picture is supposed to look like is of course also a matter that has to be settled beforehand. In order to give a general overview, it seems desirable to present the field with as little personal preference involved as possible, that is to say in a relatively neutral manner. However, since many of the most influential texts in Cultural Studies are far from neutral but instead ground themselves in strong political convictions, taking a neutral stance in selecting the texts does not mean picking exclusively texts which are themselves neutral in terms of opinion.

Methodologically, the texts can be assessed as they are, but the quality of the group responses and the online discussion can also be used to judge the viability of each text. However, one has to be aware that the constellations of the groups affect these parameters as well and are – unlike the texts themselves – subject to variation in the event of the course being run again. This

essay will discuss six texts, two that are to stay on the reading list, two that are to be removed and two that will take their place. All the text which are currently part of the reading list but are not discussed in this essay stay on the list. The following two texts were chosen in order to demonstrate the mode of reasoning that led to the decision of leaving them on the list despite their being problematic.

I personally do not agree with some points brought forth in the introduction to *Doing Race* by Markus and Moya. While I agree that it is important to combat racism and that the majority of this work has still to be done, I think the way the case is argued is at points misleading. One instance of this is a comparison of two diagrams in which racial categorization is represented in the form of dots, triangles, squares, and stars. The first diagram, representing the view that race is a biological thing, features four groups of human silhouettes containing one or more of the geometrical figures (cf. Moya & Markus 17). The other diagram, which explains the concept of "doing race", has the silhouettes empty and the figures arranged around and between them (cf. Moya & Markus 18). The explanation for the latter diagram argues that race is not inherent to anyone but that people are made into dots, triangles, etc. by their surroundings. The problem I have with this is that the silhouettes are completely empty, suggesting that the assignment of race is completely random and there is an equal chance of being made a dot, square, triangle, or star. While it is true that racial categorization is socio-historically contingent (as evident e.g. in the phenomenon of 'passing') I see no reason to believe that it is entirely based on chance and not at least partly on outward appearance. Judging human beings according to the color of their skin is wrong, but I do not think that the solution to this problem involves pretending that there are no skin colors (I am aware that the authors do not make this claim, but it is implicitly present in their conception of "doing race").

Although I disagree with some theoretical aspects of the text, I would not advise removing it from the reading list because of its special position: Being the only text for group 2.2 and the only text that focuses entirely on the concept of race, an alternative text on the same topic which is also of suitable length would have to be found to replace it. Not only is it difficult to find a suitable alternative, but most of the text is highly informative and sheds light on various important aspects of race as a concept, which enabled group 2.2 to present it in a suitable and coherent manner.

Another text I found problematic is Kahn and Kellner's "Internet Subcultures and Political Activism". My first issue would be with the initial definition of a subculture as striving to transform the dominant codes and especially as trying to "capture media attention" (217). This seems to me to

be an undue generalization, as not all subcultures seek an engagement with the dominant culture and certainly not all do this to a similar degree. There are entire classes of subcultures which try to avoid media coverage because the shared way of living around which they are built is heavily stigmatized or even illegal. The degree to which these subcultures separate and hide themselves from the mainstream can be assumed to be roughly proportional to the degree in which they are stigmatized or legally prosecuted. Examples of these would be subcultures that include as central elements consumption of certain drugs or various sexual practices. These aspects of subcultures differ widely between different parent cultures because the cultural and legal repercussions vary greatly. Accordingly, a development from a secretive subculture to a more open way of life and eventually the seeking of media attention as described by Kahn and Kellner can be observed across history and the globe for many different subcultures.

While this could be seen as a mere problem of definition, conceptual issues with the term "subculture" persist where the text moves into its prime material, subcultures on the internet. First, the authors emphasize the difference between online and offline subcultures, maintaining that online subcultures take more of an interest in political issues such as globalization than pre-internet subcultures did. However, when talking about the role of online organization and independent media in various anti-globalization movements, they mention that most of the protesters in fact belong to one of a variety of political subcultures which existed already before or apart from the internet (cf. 221, 222). The precise relationship between these subcultures and their online 'versions' is not sufficiently analyzed in the text. Similarly, the concept of Internet subcultures is not developed in satisfying depth but only those aspects of it are addressed which intersect with the angle of political activism. Apart from a brief comment on the historical relevance of ISPs, the wide scale of different internet subcultures goes largely unacknowledged. The boundaries of internet subcultures could be marked along a number of axes: political views, shared hobbies or musical taste are the common denominators for various subcultures, however there are also different ways of determining these: through self-proclamation, through user-statistics of various sites of services (chat rooms, games, etc.) or through hyperlinks between different sites. Some cultural formations on the internet, while they originally had a specific topic, have developed into more or less open spaces where almost any topic is discussed while there is still a distinct sense of identity which stems from either a constant user-base or particular discursive modes which set one community apart from the other. Also, the technical setup and design of a forum can have a huge impact on the form of social interaction that develops in it, as is the case in a comparison between bulletin boards and image boards, for example.

The reason I do not propose for the Kahn and Kellner text to be removed from the list is that while I believe the issues I identified as missing from the text are very important I know of no single

text that treats them systematically while still offering a general introduction into the topic, a function of "Internet Subcultures and Political Activism" to which participants of the course responded positively.

I suggest "Banality in Cultural Studies" by Meaghan Morris to be removed from the reading list. I believe that the different issues addressed in the text are presented in a manner that makes them hard to grasp and also makes it hard to grasp how they are related. Morris defines the aim of the paper as "creat[ing] relations where none need necessarily exist", establishing these links through a shared occurrence of the term "banality" in the analyses of the different theories (120). If an author feels the need to state in the first paragraph of a text that the "argument *does* have a point," this should set off some alarm bells already (120).

One central problem of the text seems to be that "banality" is used in very different ways in relation to the different theories addressed. While used mainly for castigation in the discussion of Cultural Studies populism and being largely absent from the treatment of de Certeau (as a term, not so much its signified), it is one of the central theoretical terms in the work of Baudrillard. In his theory, it forms a pair together with "fatality," although the relationship between them remains confusing: Banality is presented as a feature of media content, relatively close to the common meaning of the term, while the explanation of fatality does not contain any reference to death but instead discusses its relevance for value systems in the supposedly non-existent past and future of Baudrillard's analysis (cf. 125). When Morris throws in some of Baudrillard's terminology of hyperrealism, the reader is presented with gems such as this: "When fatal charm can simulate seducing banal seduction, you have a fatal strategy" (215). While I would never accuse someone of playing language games for the sake of intellectual self-affirmation, the stylistic opacity of the text, smoothly flowing between references to various theories and thinkers, makes it hard at times to appreciate it in any other way. What explanation there is often resorts to other concepts which are likely to be unknown to the participant of the course, e.g. describing Baudrillards theory as a "travesty" of "Althusserian epistemology" (125).

How difficult it is to grasp the overall argument and structure of the text can be seen in the fact that the summary by group 1.2 conflates the triadic relationship described in the editor's introduction of the text into a binary juxtaposition, leaving out Morris' critique of Cultural Studies populism. The group's summary of Morris' reading of Michel de Certeau makes some of the points seem unconnected, which however could be argued to be truthful to the text. The evaluation of

group 1.2's response is meant in no way to question their skill or dedication but merely serves to highlight the intrinsic difficulties any reader of the text is faced with.

In summary, the text deals with three different topics, of which Baudrillard and de Certeau have the strongest actual relation while the critique of populism in Cultural Studies is perhaps most obviously connected to the rest of the reading list. However, the insights to be gained from the text have to be extracted with great difficulty, making the text ultimately less valuable for an introduction to Cultural Studies than a number of others that could take its place.

I propose to put John Storey's "Rockin' Hegemony: West Coast Rock and America's War in Vietnam" in the place of "Banality in Cultural Studies." Although it is not a replacement of Morris' text, dealing with an altogether different topic, I am confident that Storey's impressive application of Gramscian theory to the role of rock music in West Coast counterculture would make a good addition to the reading list. Not only is the text very well written and easily comprehensible while still utilizing complex theoretical tools, but it also synergizes beautifully with other texts from the reading list: Storey's lucid implementation of Gramsci's ideas dovetails with Lears' introduction of the theory. It fits in well with the other texts of group 1.2, emphasizing both the political relevance of music that Russell addresses in a different way and highlighting the relationship between cultural consumption and identity that also plays a role in Radway's analysis.

I also suggest that "Theoretical Orthodoxies" by David Morley should be removed from the reading list. Unlike my criticism of the Morris text, my suggestion to remove Morley is grounded not on a belief that the text is unsuitable for the course; I found it highly informative and relevant. I wish to remove the text in order to make room for Tony Bennett's "Popular Culture and the 'turn to Gramsci'." While the two texts are similar in that they discuss methodological conflicts in Cultural Studies, Bennett's contribution might be even more beneficial for an introduction than Morley's. Due to this direct replacement, the texts will not be analyzed individually but discussed in immediate comparison.

The Bennett text is very suitable for newcomers to the field of Cultural Studies as it deals with very broad movements in the field in a way that is comprehensible without much prior knowledge. The main focus, the conflict between structuralism and culturalism and its potential resolution through the application of Gramsci, is not only presented clearly and concisely but also set in relation to earlier movements such as Leavisism and the Frankfurt School. This results in a very

comprehensive picture of the historical development of the methodology of Cultural Studies, which is important since this is something that does not necessarily become clear from reading only the theories themselves.

While Morley's critical analysis of the methodology of media studies is also very insightful, its detailed involvement with sociology and "postmodern ethnography" seems to place it just a little more towards the outer fringe of Cultural Studies than Bennett's main concerns (172). Even if this is just a subjective impression that results from the different ways methodological developments are narrated, it seems that the "turn to Gramsci" is more easily relatable to the rest of the reading list. The connections between Bennett, Lears and Storey are strong and obvious, while their different perspectives serve to minimize the amount of actual overlap and simple repetition. In comparison, the different theories which are referenced in the Morley text are harder for the participants of the seminar to connect to the rest of the material on the reading list.

Another aspect that might favor Bennett's text is its relative lack of personal opinion. While Morley offers a valid contribution to an important discussion, his explicit positioning for or against various theories could be less suited for an introduction. While critical reception of methodologies is important in any field, problematizing a theory that is still very new to the reader can lead the newcomers into uncertainty and disorientation. The other result of the higher degree in personal commitment that Morley exhibits is that the conflicts described gain a psycho-social element in addition to their theoretical content. While this human dimension is certainly an important aspect of the way theoretical developments actually work, it is not a part of academia which is generally presented in introductions because it adds significant complexity to the task of evaluating individual positions in any discussion.

This is why Bennett's approach is better suited for an introduction to Cultural Studies: By juxtaposing opposing approaches he highlights how different their individual strengths are without fundamentally questioning their validity. The fact that group 3.2 chose to summarize Morley not in continuous prose but as six individual explanations of terms emphasizes their conceptual separation and while certainly coherent, Morley's points seem to follow less directly from one another than Bennett's, which are presented in a very logical order.

Bringing together students of Cultural Studies and teachers is an idea which is in principle hugely beneficial to all, and the course succeeded in implementing this novel idea in a very productive environment. It is very desirable that this course should take place again in the future and it is of course a good decision to strive for perfection when something is repeated. I hope that the

course can take place again so others can benefit as much as I did and that my contribution can help improve the reading list and as a consequence the course as a whole.

Bibliography

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